

## Reflections

# Learning from and with shrinking regions for global transformations – commentary to Syssner

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This is a commentary to the Fennia lecture and article “What could geographers do for shrinking geographies?” by Josefina Syssner. In the piece I open up questions concerning shrinking from a global perspective and point to further discussions on global east, south, and spatial justice in post-fossil transition, which I encourage the Nordic research to engage with in the future.

Keywords: shrinking, global east, degrowth, spatial justice

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Syssner’s (2022) article is a thorough and clear overview of the current research on shrinkage especially in the Nordic context. It is pleasant to read and it highlights biases, overlooked aspects and important new directions in spatial planning and policy. In this commentary, I expand the discussion that Syssner opens up towards the end of her article on the spatial imaginaries of shrinking and on alternative perspectives and models to deal with it.

For the start, Syssner implies modestly, that we as geographers should do something to the shrinking regions, which I certainly agree with. However, the actual lesson of the text comes clear only when reading further, and points to a quite another direction: what can we learn *from* shrinking regions for the spatial planning, development and policy in general. Or better to say, as Syssner (2020, 5) states in her recent book on the same topic, from the fact that the “Decades of growth policy did not make growth happen in these areas”.

Because why, one might ask, should the research on shrinkage matter other than for the places and people facing it, if they are becoming less anyway? If urbanization is an undeniable megatrend, what does the research on shrinking areas still have to say to other debates? If so much good work is already out there and the problem is acknowledged, why do we still not understand it properly?

The work we can do is not just to understand the conditions and consequences of shrinkage, because as Syssner shows, here we already have a rich tradition to draw upon. What remains to be done is to ask better questions about the nature of the problem. One telling example about an impasse in the framing of shrinkage are the local policymakers, who insist on claiming their municipality as a growing one, although it has been shrinking since decades, while silently adapting to the reality behind closed doors. This phenomenon relates to further, widely spread curious assumptions, that shrinking is a result of a bad local policy or that shrinking places will simply and neatly disappear, once the policy and media stops paying attention to them. As Syssner (2022, 106) summarizes: "Unrealistic and biased ideas about growth and the negative framing of demographic decline have constituted a hindrance to the evolution of strategies for coping with decline".

Therefore, the article is an important call to challenge such biased ideas with sound empirical evidence and openness to unexpected perspectives. Syssner shows, that this does not matter only for the people in shrinking regions themselves. Her short insights to alternative approaches emphasize, that shrinking regions can well contribute to tackling – or accelerating – global challenges of climate change and ecological tipping points, digitalization, and adaptation to ageing, to name a few. I finish the commentary with few further reflexions from a global perspective to Nordic shrinking.

Syssner positions her case clearly in the Nordic context and also her plea to do more research from Nordic rural areas is convincing and justified. However, one remains asking, what about the research done globally? What similarities and specialities can we identify in comparing shrinkage between global north, east and south? There is no reason to expect that certain places and contexts would have less relevance for theory building on spatial change, justice, resource patterns and global interconnections than others (Haase, Rink & Grossmann 2016). Thus, I encourage to do future research in and from the Nordic countries while building up networks, discussions and comparisons with diverse other contexts, too often marginalized and considered not qualified for theorization from western perspective. For further reading I can recommend, for example, Maes, Loopmans and Kesteloot (2012), Mihály (2019), and Wu and colleagues (2022).

Finally, global ecological destruction raises difficult questions also for the future of shrinking regions, not yet explicitly addressed in Syssner's article. First is the question on spatial justice and the different scales of political power and responsibility mobilized in debates on justice. Claims to equal welfare and the definition and experience of an adequate welfare standard voiced by the residents of a northern shrinking region are negotiated within the borders of a Nordic nation state and with a reference to the urban citizens of the same nation. At the same time, the current research on eco-welfare state reminds, that these Nordic, national welfare standards in general lead to a severe overconsumption on a global scale (Koch 2018; Hirvilammi 2020). Although the maintenance of the welfare standard in Nordic countries contributes to the destruction of living conditions elsewhere, the protection of 'our' (white) welfare system is used as an argument against migration (Simonsen 2015). Such questions on global responsibility and interdependencies are, however, yet very seldomly discussed when searching for new ways to adapt to shrinkage and keep the promise of qualified public services in the Nordic countries.

So, in what terms is shrinkage then a problem in a first place? It is certainly much more complex than simple difference in income levels, the lack of employment or certain services. In a society, where economic growth and urbanization are not just development trajectories among others, but norms attached to prosperous, desirable and successful future, shrinking is strongly connected to a stigmatization and the loss of societal standing. Canavan (2013) and Morton and Müller (2016) have studied the shrinking processes of a previously prosperous coal industry and mass tourism. According to the authors, the experienced negative effects of shrinkage such as the loss of an identity, of the connectivity to global mobility flows and of external recognition may outweighed the possible positive benefits, that might actually be much more real and tangible, such as improvement of the natural environment, reduction of noise, health risks and waste. More importantly, such experiences

may hinder the openness of the residents to alternative solutions that accept the situation and build upon the possibilities that shrinkage provides. Gibson-Graham (2006, 33, 50–51) has powerfully described the process, how such dependent and passive subjectivities and regional identities are constructed to serve major national and international industrial development projects, so that when the capital leaves the region, what remains are passivity and frustration. Simultaneously, however, other examples show that the availability of space for experiments, quality of natural environment and the possibility for self-sustained living in local and regional value chains in the very same regions also draw others to remigrate or temporary stay there and build up new, perhaps more frugal ways of living and working (Cunha, Kastenholz & Carneiro 2020; Houtbeckers & Kallio 2019).

These are just a few examples of the potentials that shrinking regions provide for ecological transformations, conflicts and inequalities, that need to be taken seriously – if not only shrinkage, but also new means of small-scale and sustainable production and caring in shrinking regions are to be turned from a marginal phenomenon to a liveable future. Here I would welcome stronger engagement of the fields of circular economy, as Syssner mentioned, as well as economic geography and innovation with social and solidarity, diverse and community economies, degrowth, post-development and climate transition debates – and with experiences of and studies on shrinking.

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