

Depopulation and shrinkage in a Northern context: geographical perspectives, spatial processes and policies

Depopulation and shrinkage are a common socio-spatial phenomenon in many Northern localities and are frequently accompanied by a stigmatization of the affected localities and their populations. This editorial introduces the special issue on depopulation and shrinkage in a Northern context that takes its point of departure from the Nordic Geographers Meeting 2022 on multiple geographies and its keynote lecture by Josefina Syssner on the question: What can geographers do for shrinking geographies? The special issue displays a range of contributions from Northern context that discuss and evaluate the heterogeneous processes of shrinking localities from multiple perspectives within and beyond geography. Through broad, yet empirically detailed and multiscale focused assessments it stresses that shrinkage as a phenomenon is a fundamental character of Nordic and other societies, which requires a rethinking and should be acknowledged as a 'natural' development trajectory in planning and development.

Keywords: shrinking, depopulation, Nordic countries, multiple geographies

The idea for this special issue of *Fennia* was developed in parallel with the arrangement of the 9th Nordic Geographers Meeting on *multiple geographies*, which took place from June 19th–22nd 2022, in Joensuu, Finland. The keynote speaker for the Fennia lecture was Josefina Syssner, and her presentation was titled *What can geographers do for shrinking geographies?*

Highlighting the topic of shrinking geographies at an international geographic conference held in a Nordic regional centre surrounded by shrinking places was a natural choice as it directly addresses issues of local concern. While the topic is well suited to the spatial processes and challenges in Joensuu and North-Karelia, it requires scrutiny beyond the shrinking Finnish-Russian borderlands. Depopulation and broader socio-economic shrinkage have constituted a unifying characteristic of many Nordic regions outside the major urban growth centres during the last decades. Current demographic and socio-economic trends in the Nordic and Baltic countries show that growth is and will most likely be limited to a few places, predominantly metropolitan areas and larger urban centres (e.g. Heleniak & Sánchez Gassen 2019; ESPON 2020a; MDI 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic questioned previsions of continuous urbanisation as rural living trends became increasingly popular and provided hope for, at least, a temporary window of opportunity for shrinking places. However, such trends are subject to volatile processes through an array of

socio-spatial influences and are prone to shift quickly, particularly in locally framed settings (cf. Schlömer *et al.* 2018). For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine, Eastern Finland's proximity to the Russian border decreased its attractiveness as a rural residence area, seemingly closing the window of opportunity that had risen during the pandemic (e.g. Kolehmainen 2022; Uutissuomalainen 2022). Hence, while various trends and developments continuously affect the fate and opportunities of shrinking localities and might flatten, even out or reverse the shrinkage of localities, shrinking geographies will remain a constant and potentially challenging reality of societal transformations. Consequently, they require academic and societal attention beyond the assessment of trends and numerical analysis.

In the Northern European context, the consequences of shrinkage and depopulation for localities – such as reduced tax bases, increasing dependency ratios, oversized and costly infrastructure, cuts in public service provision and the effects on local identities – have been studied to great lengths (see Sysenner 2022). The challenges that derive from these socio-spatial processes provide reasons to address the topic more closely.

Massey (2005, 131) once described places “as open, as woven together out of ongoing stories [...] as unfinished business”. Following this idea, locally embedded shrinking geographies must be seen as parts of a relational assembling of space entwined with the power geometries which constitute global and local processes. Hence, they are both the result and reproducers of contemporary societal structures and political developments. Rodriguez-Pose (2020, 8) exemplifies this more concretely by referring to the revenge of “places that don't matter” based on their emerging role to fuel populist sentiments or voting behaviour in many countries. Protests such as *Convoy Finland* or *Bensinupproret* in Sweden against soaring fuel prices are examples linked to experienced or perceived inequalities between growth-centres and declining, often rural localities. In a similar vein, the success of the *Sweden Democrats* – a right-wing populist nationalist party – in the Swedish election in September 2022, has also been interpreted as a protest of the periphery against the centres of power (SR 2022). Such societal developments directly point to the potential socio-spatial reach of shrinking geographies and the need to geographically unfold these processes.

The connections raised above show that shrinking places ‘do matter’. The negative effects attached to depopulation and shrinkage have reinforced the stigmatisation of these localities and justified attempts to remediate shrinkage rather than to rethink the trajectories and potentials of it. Political institutions from the European Union (EU), national governments and regional bodies are indeed designing and mobilising various strategies to address the issue of declining localities and regions (Leetmaa *et al.* 2015; Küpper *et al.* 2018; ESPON 2020b). Yet, while attempts to plan for demographic adaptation, to work for smart shrinkage, and question conventional growth-rhetoric have sparked alternative development approaches in a variety of places, planning for growth, but managing decline has remained a reality for politicians and planners in Nordic peripheries (e.g. Schatz 2017).

The current framing of places subject to decline and depopulation shapes the aim of this special issue. It combines the question raised by Josefina Sysenner's keynote, on the potential of geographers to address shrinking geographies, and the wider focus of the conference on the multiplicity of geographical research (Albrecht *et al.* 2022). The collection of papers in this special issue discusses, displays, and unfolds the potentials that multiple geographical perspectives can provide to approach shrinkage as a spatial reality in various (Nordic) places/regions. It combines critical perspectives framed in multiple strands of human geography and related fields to assess the spatially complex, societally pressing, and politically sensitive processes of shrinkage. Taken together, the individual contributions offer a broad, multidimensional, and sensitive spatial understanding that enables researchers, planners, and policy makers to rethink their approaches to address these processes in the Nordic context. For this purpose, the special issue includes original articles from authors in Estonia, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, followed by a series of commentaries that extend the geographic reach of perspectives within and beyond the Northern European realm. The contributions cover a wide array of geographical thoughts, and their multiple geographies perspectives enable the evaluation of shrinkage through a heterogenous lens. The following section briefly introduces the contributions, provides some framing thoughts, and adds a practical layer on the open processes that guided the development of this collection.

Multiple geographies of shrinkage

Providing the initial impetus for the academic debate in this special issue, the contribution by Josefina Syssner refines the thoughts presented in her NGM 2022 keynote lecture *What can geographers do for shrinking geographies?* She provides a review of research drawing on a substantial range of literature on shrinking geographies that assess the spatial configurations of resource patterns of shrinkage. In her contribution Syssner suggests that geographical research can assist in clarifying why patterns of shrinkage take the shape they do, what consequences these patterns have locally, and how shrinkage tends to be associated with a certain stigma. Syssner also gives an overview of the wide array of policy responses to shrinkage identified in academic literature. She skilfully complements this review with a brief assessment of alternative models in planning and development that incorporate shrinkage in a more constructive manner.

While providing a Northern perspective, Syssner calls for more geographical engagement with the topic. She raises the need to provide thorough, spatially grounded perspectives that overcome the negative stigmatisations of shrinkage and treat it as a developmental process among many, including challenges but also potentials and benefits. The other contributions in this special issue offer diverse attempts to answer this call from a Nordic perspective. The collection is loosely framed in three sections: bordering shrinkage, contextualising development and planning in shrinking places and regions, and livelihoods of shrinking geographies.

Defining shrinkage is a wicked problem, as many of the contributions in this special issue illustrate. The first two papers are directly concerned with the complex processes and shades of 'bordering' between shrinking and not shrinking. Since the results of these socio-spatial processes are often equated with the demarcation of the border between successful and failing places, these contributions directly raise awareness of the problems of such dualistic stigmatisations. Maija Halonen's (2022) paper *Multiple meanings and boundaries of growth in shrinking regions in East and North Finland* addresses this aspect from a discourse-oriented perspective of regional policy actors. Based on studies in shrinking regions in East and North Finland, Halonen examines how growth is conceptualised by regional development actors. Her work assesses the variegated meanings, criticism, and boundaries that different actors attribute to delineate growth and consequently shape the political discourse of what counts as shrinkage.

Approaching the issue from the other, shrinking side, Teemu Makkonen, Tommi Inkinen and Simo Rautiainen (2022) contribute a methodological discussion on how varying measurements of shrinkage may in turn affect our understanding of shrinkage in their paper *Mapping spatio-temporal variations of shrinkage in Finland*. By utilising indicators such as depopulation, job loss and housing vacancy, different time periods and various spatial scales, they show how the employment of different indicators and spatio-temporal scales results in a widely different assessment as to whether particular regions are identified as shrinking or not. While both papers focus on Finland their core messages are clearly applicable in a broader Northern European context and even beyond.

Turning to contributions that contextualise processes of development and planning for shrinking regions and places, the often thin and fluid line between being labelled as shrinking or not also plays a role in the article by Linda Lundmark, Doris Carson and Marco Eimermann (2022), titled *Spillover, sponge or something else? Dismantling expectations for rural development resulting from giga-investments in Northern Sweden*. Linked to the common yet paradoxical situation of planning for growth but managing decline, their case study of Northern Sweden demonstrates how efforts have been made in regional planning for demographic adaptation, smart shrinkage, and right-sizing. However, current green technology giga-investments in Northern Sweden contribute to a rapid re-shift towards growth trajectories in policy and public debate. In this setting, they discuss the potential of positive spillover effects and development opportunities for rural and sparsely populated municipalities in the North.

Shifting the debate to local levels of implementation and practice, Aksel Hagen, Ulla Higdem and Kjell Overvåg (2022) study the attempts of 31 municipalities tied to the Norwegian planning system in Norway's Inland region to meet the challenges faced by shrinking rural localities. The article *Planning to meet challenges in shrinking rural regions. Towards innovative approaches to local planning* points out the paradox between awareness of shrinkage while continuing to plan for growth as a

dominant pathway in Norwegian local planning. The authors explain the structural and institutional dilemmas that reproduce this problematic situation as well as their consequences for planning.

Another contextualisation is provided by Moritz Albrecht and Jarmo Kortelainen (2022) who study revitalisation projects and related processes in six shrinking small town centres in Finland. Framed by accounts on planning, place-making, and urban shrinkage, their paper *Contested planning efforts for the revitalization of small town centres in Finland* employs an assemblage approach that contrasts local planning efforts with the complex spatial processes of place-making. It highlights the relations, challenges and potentials of small town developers to engage with alternative approaches to plan for or with shrinkage. Their contribution raises the need for more inclusive and spatially attentive approaches while addressing the limited capacities of small towns to engage in policy experimentation within the current planning framework.

The final two contributions provide contextual examples that focus on the effects that shrinking geographies inflict on local livelihoods. Dean Carson, Doris Carson, Linda Lundmark and Anna-Karin Hurtig (2022) employ extensive quantitative and qualitative datasets to analyse resource deserts in sparsely populated areas in Southern Swedish Lapland. Their article *Resource deserts, village hierarchies and de-growth in sparsely populated areas: the case of Southern Lapland, Sweden* focuses on the presence of three key resources in 54 small settlements: preschools, grocery stores, and petrol stations. Specifically, they explore the effects on local livelihoods in places that have been subject to long-term disinvestment and further address the potential and challenges of local 'de-growth' approaches.

In the last article *Everyday materialities, territorial bordering, and place-identity defined by recent administrative reform: reactions from Estonian dispersed ruralities*, Kadri Kasemets and Raili Nugin (2022) assess the effects of the Estonian municipal reforms of 2017 on the materialisation of everyday mobilities, governance and related identities in rural villages. It employs an ethnographic approach and 60 in-depth interviews with local activists and inhabitants from ten villages in three sparsely populated areas in Estonia. The contribution assesses how the reform, initiated as a response to population decline, has produced shifts in everyday governance and spurred changes in the potentials for participative governance. It also shows how the reform has affected the bordering of local identities that are important for local activism.

The original articles of this special issue are supplemented by four shorter texts in the reflections section. The paper by Matthias Kokorsch (2022), *Community resilience: a useful concept for declining Icelandic communities?*, provides a critical assessment of the conceptualisation of resilience in relation to declining Icelandic localities. The three scientific commentaries by Marlies Meijer, Sunna Kovanen, and Marika Kettunen and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola critically discuss the keynote article by Josefina Syssner (2022).

Meijer's (2022) commentary *Shrinking geographies or challenged ruralities? Three points of reflection – commentary to Syssner* stresses that peripheral geographies and challenged ruralities deserve a key position within geography and that the topic of shrinkage needs to be repoliticised – both in terms of what we research and what advice we offer to those living in peripheral, rural and depopulating regions. In the second commentary *Learning from and with shrinking regions for global transformations – commentary to Syssner*, Kovanen (2022) stresses the need to scrutinise how environmental and spatial justice is either neglected or mobilised in shrinking regions. She also highlights the potential of a more explicit integration of the fields of economic geography and innovation, social and solidarity economies, circular economy degrowth and climate transition with experiences of and studies on shrinking. Finally, Kettunen and Prokkola's (2022) commentary *Young people as agents in regional shrinkage – commentary to Syssner* emphasises the importance of acknowledging the impacts of shrinkage on different groups, especially young people. The reflection papers not only provide additional perspectives from those seen in the rest of the special issue, but also increase the geographical reach of this collection.

Altogether, this collection presents shrinkage as a multidimensional and evolving phenomenon which requires constant adaptation, and various strategies to rescale and rethink what shrinkage means in various geographical contexts. While the concrete subjects of analysis and their approaches to regional development and local planning do not reflect a paradigm shift or transformation away from managing shrinkage, they clearly contradict the idea that shrinking localities are places that do not matter or should be of less concern than their growing, perceived as successful counterparts.

Although shrinkage tends to require managing and remediating negative consequences related to the declining characteristics within a community or a region, the socio-spatial capacities and relations of shrinking places and their surrounding society seem more important in enabling or hindering the liveability of the places. Most importantly, all contributions point to the fact that shrinkage as a phenomenon is a fundamental character of Nordic and other societies, which requires a rethinking and, akin to planning for growth, should be acknowledged as a 'natural' development trajectory.

Making of the special issue

To conclude this editorial, we wish to share our experiences on the process of editing this special issue from both a practical and an academic perspective. While the *Fennia* journal is a frontrunner for open review processes in geographical publishing (see previous issues), this has been the first special issue to employ an open review process for all its contributions. Shifting the writing and review process from an activity of solitary authors to a more constructive scholarly discussion format resulted in a multistep process. The only part that lacked a fully open approach was the act of collecting contributions. Contrary to an open call, we employed a snowballing method initiated by the guest editors with focus on Northern academic networks related to shrinking geographies. It is possible that an open call could have enabled a more balanced geographical distribution instead of the slight bias towards Finland and Sweden.

Following the initial collection of contributions, an internal open pre-review process was initiated wherein all but one of the manuscripts were read and commented on by the author(s) from two of the other papers (Carson *et al.* was submitted later). The pre-review process culminated in a joint online feedback seminar on March 25th, 2022, where manuscripts were presented and feedback from pre-reviewers and other authors was given to each contributor. Additionally, in most cases written review statements were offered to the authors. This not only provided constructive peer feedback to each manuscript but also allowed a certain alignment of the articles and a more thorough understanding of the whole for everyone involved. Following this pre-review round, all manuscripts were revised before being submitted to the official *Fennia* open review process.

To find reviewers for the open review process, potential candidates with a key focus on topical expertise were contacted by authors and editors alike (see also Kallio & Riding 2019). This meant that in some cases the reviewers and the authors were well aware of each other's work and some had past or even ongoing research collaboration. In our experience the close professional relations between authors and reviewers did not affect the reviews nor create a 'laissez-faire style' but, instead, produced fruitful and critical open review discussions, as the example of Josefina Syssner's integration of the review comments from Marlies Meijer and Sunna Kovanen illustrates. Generally, as with blind review processes, it was challenging to attract reviewers able to spare the time required for reviewing. Additionally, while the editorial work of managing the complete review process for the special issue was carried out in only 6 months, if taken on actively by the reviewers, the open review process adds an additional time requirement and rounds of engagement for the reviewers compared to the usual blind review process. This is an important aspect that we, as the editorial team, failed to express more clearly at the outset of the process.

Overall, the open reviews provided critical yet constructive reviews, while the intensity of the open review discussions covered a rather wide spectrum ranging from a business as usual (comments provided, revisions by the author, revisions accepted by the reviewers) to very intensive and detailed discussions on a wide variety of aspects linked to the respective manuscript. In the case of this special issue, the mix of familiarity between reviewers and authors, and the employment of young, enthusiastic scholars as reviewers spurred the most intense, open review discussions where all sides invested time and much thought to jointly improve the respective manuscripts. Naturally, assembling such a review process in our self-centred, competitive academic environment might be wishful thinking in most cases. Nonetheless, while it is obvious that not everyone can spend the time to comment repeatedly on the details of a given paper, as editors we enjoyed how the reviewers who actively participated in these discussions did engage openly and personally in the open review process. The reviews clearly

took on a motivating constructive tone of critical enquiry rather than the frequently encountered aspects of destructive or cold criticism common in many anonymous review processes. Despite some challenges, the positive and open atmosphere of the open review process was also confirmed in follow up discussions with some of the reviewers. As editors, we would like to express our gratefulness to the authors for their diverse and valuable contributions, and to all reviewers for their valuable and thought-provoking comments and, of course, the time spent to review the papers.

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