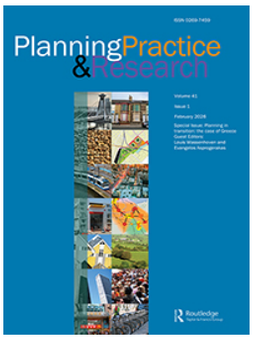

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Stigma, constraints and policy paralysis. Explaining local governments' failure to deal with population decline

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ABSTRACT

This practice review examines why local governments rarely develop explicit strategies to adapt to population decline, despite recognizing its consequences. Drawing on literature and field-based insights from Europe, we identify ten recurring conditions that hinder development of adaptation strategies. These conditions range from uncertainty about what an adaptation plan is, norms and stigma, temporal aspects, limited professional capacity, external pressures, goal dependency, and 'accidental' success. For each condition, we describe how it plays out in practice and suggest avenues for empirical inquiry. We conclude with practical reflections and guidance for planners and policy makers working in areas facing population decline.

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Shrinkage; demographic change; population decline adaptation; policy failure; local government

Introduction

In recent years, a growing scholarly attention has been devoted to depopulation in Europe's rural areas (Panagopoulos & Barreira, 2012; Hospers, 2013; Johansson *et al.*, 2018; Syssner, 2023). There are indeed differences in the way shrinkage is talked about and dealt with in different countries and political systems, not only globally but also within continents (Haase *et al.*, 2017). However, scholars at several continents have repeatedly recognised that local government representatives avoid developing strategies for dealing with long-term population decline (for a few of many examples; Panagopoulos & Barreira, 2012; Hospers & Reverda, 2015; Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016; Johansson *et al.*, 2018; Beunen *et al.*, 2020; Copus *et al.*, 2020; Syssner, 2020b, 2023; Bock & Haartsen, 2021; Hagen *et al.*, 2022; Meijer, 2023).

In the literature, a first distinction is often made between policies aimed at expansion, growth, and trend reversal (and thus neglecting shrinkage) and those that accept population decline and aim to plan for it. Most of these models show that the policy response to shrinkage can be understood as a continuum, with ignorance and denial at one end, attempts to reverse the demographic trend in the middle, and active and innovative use of place-specific conditions of shrinkage at

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the other (Hospers & Reverda, 2015; Haase *et al.*, 2017; Hagen *et al.*, 2022). Though we find examples of all strategies in local policy and planning, many studies conclude that the most common policy response is either to ignore population decline or to attempt to reverse it. Examples of local governments developing explicit plans to cope with and adapt to population decline remain rare. That is, the limited willingness or capacity to plan for continued decline has been addressed frequently (Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016; Schatz, 2017; Bock & Haartsen, 2021).

Yet few studies have explored this limited willingness or capacity in its own right. We know that such unwillingness or incapacity exists, but we do not know why. To fill this gap, this review draws on both current literature and on contemporary planning practice to provide a structured understanding of why local governments in shrinking cities and regions seldom plan for future population decline. The aim is to identify those conditions that act as hindrances or barriers to developing explicit plans or policies for demographic adaptation. By providing this structured understanding, we offer a novel perspective on shrinking cities and regions and provide acknowledgement, reflection and guidance for planners and policy makers working in areas facing population decline.

A relational view on failures

Analytically, we address the inability to plan for population decline as a policy failure. Studies of policy failures tend to begin with defining what a failure is, and how and when failures are interpreted as such (McConnell, 2015; Peters, 2015). In line with this literature, we consider failures as something that is both perceived and politically and socially constructed through discourses and narratives (McConnell, 2010, 2015). What is perceived as success or failure varies from person to person, over time and across cognitive and normative frameworks (Peters, 2015; Habersang *et al.*, 2019; Howlett et al., 2015). We also regard failure as a relational concept (Dahlin *et al.*, 2018). That is, failure arises in relation to intended goals, costs, benefits, time, or target groups (McConnell, 2015; Bovens & 't Hart, 2016).

Against the background of this literature, we understand the inability of local governments to address long-term population decline as a policy failure in the following sense: Local government representatives often emphasize the negative consequences of population decline. Yet they rarely present concrete plans for how to manage these consequences. In other words, there is a mismatch between policymakers' recognition of the challenges posed by population decline and the strategies they develop to address them. We define this gap as a form of policy failure that requires explanation. Why do local governments in shrinking cities and regions so seldom develop adaptation strategies – even when they are well aware of the consequences? What factors hinder them from doing so?

Like many other studies of policy failure, we are less interested in the nature of the failure itself and more interested in the conditions that shape failures (McConnell, 2010, 2015). Again, what hinders local governments in shrinking cities and regions from developing strategies to adapt to population decline, when they themselves agree that the consequences of decline are severe? In the following, we identify ten conditions that provide us with a structured understanding of why this is the case. By reviewing these

conditions, we hope to offer reflections and guidance for planners and policymakers addressing population decline elsewhere.

An analytical construct

In our search for conditions that prevent local governments from developing demographic adaptation strategies, we have consulted the extensive body of literature partially referred to above. We have however also reflected on our own empirical experiences – mostly in the Netherlands and Sweden, but also through collaborative work with colleagues in countries like Iceland, Norway, Finland, Germany, and Spain (for an overview of this work, see Beunen *et al.*, 2020; Meijer, 2020, 2023; Meijer *et al.*, 2023; Meijer & Syssner, 2017; Syssner, 2006, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020a, 2023; Syssner & Erlingsson, 2025; Syssner & Meijer, 2020; Syssner & Olausson, 2015, 2016, 2019; Syssner & Siebert, 2020).

Hence, throughout our academic careers, we have done a multitude of interviews with and observations among local and regional civil servants, planners, politicians, and representatives of supporting NGO's. We have reviewed a large span of policy documents, plans and programmes in several national contexts. While our previous empirical studies examined how local governments respond to population decline (typically with reluctance or denial) we did not previously address *why* they respond the way they do. Still, our extensive fieldwork provided valuable empirical experience when we began to reflect on the conditions that hinder local planners and policy makers from developing explicit adaptation strategies. Nonetheless, the ten conditions identified here are *our analytical construct*. That is, they do not represent self-reflective explanations offered by local politicians, but our own interpretation of the structural and institutional factors underlying their inaction.

Conditions for failure

In this paper, we contend that the unwillingness, inability, or incapacity of local governments in shrinking cities and regions to develop explicit adaptation strategies constitutes a policy failure. In what follows, we suggest that ten conditions can help us understand the existence of this very failure. We know that the nature and impact of the conditions we refer to vary across time and space. Still, we hope that an awareness of any – or all – of these conditions can guide future scholars and students, as well as practitioners reflecting on the policy production within their own organizations. In relation to each condition identified, we describe how it plays out and reflect on how it could be explored empirically in future studies across different settings.

Uncertainties about what constitutes a plan for adaptation

A first condition that makes local planners and politicians unable to develop plans for how to cope with population decline is that they are uncertain about what a local adaptation policy or plan actually is.

In many countries it is stipulated by law what plans a local or regional government must develop. In Sweden, municipalities are legally required to prepare a comprehensive plan, detailed development plans, plan descriptions, a budget, and an annual report. They must also describe the environmental consequences of their planning and how housing needs will be met. Many other countries have similar systems. There is, however, no legal requirement to develop a separate plan for how to manage demographic change.

One option is, of course, to allow this issue of depopulation to permeate some or all legally required plans. For example, the comprehensive plan could be the document in which a Swedish municipality describes how it intends to address continuing population decline (even though our research group has shown that this is not the case (Syssner & Olausson, 2016)). Population decline could also be addressed in separate plans prepared for the development of schools, elderly care, or social services. When demographic adaptation is addressed in such plans, they can be seen as sector-specific, de facto adaptation strategies. The existence of such sector-specific municipal adaptation plans and strategies is also confirmed by recent studies from Norway (Hagen *et al.*, 2022). However, these sector-specific documents make it difficult for external observers to gain an overview of what is actually being done to cope with population decline.

Another option is to prepare a specific document, but this raises the question of what status such a document would have within the municipality's planning or policy hierarchy. In an ongoing project, we have also encountered the question of whether a plan for adaptation should be a broad, forward-looking vision document with guiding principles for policymaking, or a more detailed and practical list of what should be changed, prioritised, or deprioritised in the years to come.

Against this background, we identify a need for more empirical knowledge on how plans for adaptation can actually be designed – whether sector-specific or overarching, time-bound or long-term. A broader range of examples would provide planners, politicians, and practitioners with concrete cases to learn from and draw inspiration for local tailoring.

The perceived potential benefits of growth

A second condition that makes local planners and politicians avoid developing strategies to deal with long-term population decline is that a stable or slightly growing population has several pragmatic advantages. This is particularly evident in sparsely populated, remote and rural areas, where municipal organisations are vulnerable in many ways – to sudden changes in costs or revenues, to changing or increased government requirements, or to a loss of competence when individual employees leave (Syssner & Olausson, 2015).

In countries like Sweden, where income taxes are allocated at the municipal level, more working-age residents mean not only a broader skill pool but also greater potential tax revenue. This, in turn, makes the municipality more resilient, both organisationally and economically. In countries like the Netherlands, where income from land development (for housing, businesses, or industry) forms a significant part of local budgets, population growth creates a similar positive spiral of new development and increased municipal revenue. To the contrary, adapting service levels to fewer residents and downsizing infrastructure has a considerable impact on municipal finances and

organisation structures (Beunen *et al.*, 2020). Given these circumstances, it seems indeed reasonable for local governments to continue to strive for growth.

Against this background it would however be valuable to study empirically how the benefits of growth are presented in relation to the actual benefits. We know that population growth is a highly unlikely scenario in many places. Nonetheless, we could inquire whether the benefits of this unlikely growth are real or merely imagined? Such an analysis would be useful for those who wish to plan for decline but are overridden by arguments about the benefits of growth.

The growth norm

A third condition that limits the capacity for demographic adaptation is the existence of a persistent growth norm (as mentioned above), identified in our field studies and widely emphasised in the literature. Several scholars from various continents have noted that a major challenge for local governments in shrinking regions is shifting from growth as the dominant normative doctrine in planning to accepting shrinkage (Hospers, 2013; Pallagst, 2015; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). Growth is often presented as a panacea or, as Leo and Anderson (2006) put it, 'the elixir that cures all ills'. From the literature and from our own observations, we know that government officials in depopulating areas tend to emphasise growth, even if in reality they have to manage decline (Schatz, 2017).

In this context, a norm can thus be understood as a generally accepted, implicit perception or idea about how society should function and how people should act (Therborn, 1993). When these perceptions and ideas become dominant – when they develop into social norms – they tend to be followed, even if there are no formal laws or regulations requiring people to do so (see Beunen *et al.*, 2020, for examples from the Netherlands).

The growth norm can therefore be interpreted as a dominant idea that leads many local politicians to genuinely believe their main role is to act as ambassadors for their locality or as the 'head booster' of their city, as Hollander (2018) puts it. As growth has attained core value status (Syssner, 2006), it is assumed that there is a high political cost to speaking openly about shrinkage. In the literature, there are also several examples of how planners and politicians believe that talking openly about shrinkage can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hollander, 2018). Furthermore, discussing decline and the difficult decisions it entails also carries political risks. Such messages are often poorly received by citizens, while opposing candidates are more likely to gain support by emphasising promises of growth and renewal rather than cutbacks.

In this context, further studies could be helpful to understand both the persistence of growth-oriented norms and ideas, and the circumstances under which they have been successfully challenged.

The merits of vagueness (and the clashes of preciseness)

A fourth condition that makes it difficult for local planners and politicians to plan for population decline is that politics tend to favour vagueness and discourage precision. In this context, the inherent vagueness of the concept of growth can be seen as a key reason

for its political productivity. Although growth occupies a central position in the normative framework of local policy and planning, it remains a vague and ill-defined concept. Our fieldwork in the Netherlands and Sweden shows that, in both countries, the term *growth* is used in different, overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways. For example, it may refer to increasing population numbers, employment rates, productivity, available jobs, or public finances (Syssner, 2006, 2025; Meijer *et al.*, 2023).

This vagueness means that politicians can speak positively, generally, and sweepingly about growth without knowing whether their understanding is shared by those they communicate with at the moment. At various times, growth can be referred to as an applied value, a means to an end, or as something that is valuable because of its consequences in the form of more jobs or more prosperity (Syssner, 2012). In other cases, growth can be referred to as a value in itself (Beunen *et al.*, 2020).

Vagueness makes it easier to talk about growth than adaptation. In political programmes for growth, the tone is usually cheerful and positive, as if everyone would be better off if only we manage to grow (see Kahila *et al.*, 2022). In an adaptation policy context, the discourse is completely different. A plan or policy in which local governments explain how they intend to address long-term population decline must be precise, recognise conflicts of interest, require accurate assessments and rigorous prioritisation.

Temporal aspects, gradual change

A fifth condition contributing to the inability of local planners and politicians to prepare for population decline is related to the gradual, continuous, and long-term nature of this very process (for a discussion, see Djurkin *et al.*, 2023). The gradualness of population decline has several implications. To begin with, as researchers studying policy failure have already noted, emergencies, rapid changes and crises attract the attention of decision-makers more easily than long-term, slow-burning crises (Bovens *et al.*, 2001; Peters, 2015). Slow, incremental, and long-term changes with unclear impacts usually do not end up on the official policy agenda (Peters, 2015).

Moreover, the gradualness of most depopulation trends allows local government representatives to cling to the hope that the trend will reverse, that the birth rate will increase, that out-migration will stop and that new residents will find their way into the community. Representatives of local governments also report that it is difficult to know whether population decline will continue and at what point adaptation measures, savings or organisational changes will be needed (Beunen *et al.*, 2020; Syssner, 2023).

Gradualness is accompanied with more complex demographic trends. To illustrate, in the Netherlands, shrinkage became a dominant topic on the national and regional policy agenda between 2005 and 2015 (Kahila *et al.*, 2022; Meijer, 2023). In this period, (projected) population decline was identified as a potential hazard for local liveability and economic development in rural peripheral areas. At the national level, adaptation policies were formulated, stimulating local governments to take policy measures to mitigate the effects of population decline. However, the migration crisis of 2015 turned out to be a game changer. In many rural peripheries in both Sweden and the Netherlands, the decline rate stabilised, and in some localities the population even started to increase again. Due to international migration, post-pandemic dynamics and an urban housing shortage, some settlement structures changed in favour of rural areas with a commuting

distance to larger labour markets. These trends have however failed to re-populate remote and peripheral areas facing long term population decline (Syssner, 2020a).

However, at the same time academics point out the continuation of more structural (and unobserved) demographic changes, with unsettling effects for local development opportunities (Bock & Haartsen, 2021). Declining pupil numbers and an increasingly ageing society indicate that legacy shrinking is an important underlying phenomenon. In this vein, Steinführer and Grossmann (2021) argue that the hidden dynamics of old-age immigration in shrinking areas can augment the longer-term consequences of population decline. As such, population growth can go hand in hand with amplified ageing of the population. The result, however, is a growing population in need of care facilities, and a growing lack of labour to provide such care. Another substantial growth group consists of recognised refugees, who are offered residences in rural areas, but tend to resettle to larger towns as soon as they legally can. As such, their contribution to rural population growth is thus provisional, and challenging for policymakers (Meijer *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, changes to services of general interest are not decided on or implemented gradually, but in episodes. In an earlier study, one interviewee noted that the walls of the school cannot be moved to reflect the declining numbers of pupils in classes. As long as the school with declining numbers of pupils is in operation, it has a costly surplus of space in the premises (Syssner & Olausson, 2016).

To address the temporal challenges of planning for population decline, we gain a better understanding of how policymakers and planners (can) respond to slow-burning crises that unfold gradually over time, and how planning processes can be adapted to anticipate – not just react to – demographic decline.

External pressure

A sixth factor that makes it difficult for local planners and politicians to manage population decline relates to external pressures. A specific form of external pressure came with the shift of paradigms in European regional development policy in the 1990s. By then a new approach to regional development – sometimes referred to as the new regional development paradigm – established that regions are competitors, and that the main aim of the state and the European Union is to support regions in their efforts to become more competitive (Keating, 1998; Syssner, 2006, 2012, 2020a).

With the new regional development paradigm, competitiveness became a core value in local and regional development policy. Up to this day, funding is still allocated for projects designed to promote local and regional growth and competitiveness. Our research group has followed and documented several such initiatives in Sweden (Olausson & Syssner, 2017; Syssner & Hjerpe, 2017; Syssner & Olausson, 2019), and in the Netherlands similar initiatives can be observed, including large investments in real estate development to attract new businesses and residents (Beunen *et al.*, 2020).

What is relevant here is that such initiatives pressure local actors to prioritise competitiveness over issues related to current and future population decline. Competitiveness thus became a vital category not only in relation to a globalised economy, but also for securing funding for local and regional development projects (see Kahila *et al.*, 2022). In our interviews, local and regional representatives expressed that they had little to gain from emphasising the challenges they faced.

To support their locality, politicians and planners instead had to act as ambassadors and salespeople (Syssner, 2012), positioning themselves as potential recipients of state funding aimed at promoting competitiveness.

Another example of external pressure relates to how lobbying organisations and consulting firms classify and evaluate municipalities according to their growth potential. In Sweden, the lobby organisation Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (*Svenskt Näringsliv*) produces a list each year, claiming to rank the municipalities according to their growth potential and business climate. A recent study reveals that the ranking list is used as an important source of knowledge for the municipal sector and has an impact on local policy and practise (Syssner & Erlingsson, 2025).

Both examples mentioned above illustrate forms of external pressure that make it difficult for local government representatives to describe their own community or region as being in decline or in need of support. No one wants to be framed as a loser, and the examples above indicate that calls for help result not in assistance, but in shame and blame. Further empirical research would be valuable to trace funding flows, project evaluations, and policy instruments tied to growth targets. It would also be useful to examine whether, and how, local actors resist such external pressures.

Goal dependencies in policy

A further condition that makes it difficult for local government representatives to talk about adaptation is the fact that so many of them have invested so much and for so long in the rhetoric of growth. As mentioned earlier, growth tends to be the overarching policy goal of local development policy – even in places that have been struggling with population decline for years. And even when local growth policies do not appear to be very successful in these contexts, the policy objectives generally remain the same. This suggests that we are observing an example of incremental policymaking. In incremental policymaking, previous policy goals or policy theories are neither challenged nor threatened. Rather, we observed that policy makers adopt the policies of the past and put forward only minor adjustments (see also: Bontje, 2024) – especially in absence of urgent crisis.

Moreover, in practice, it is obvious that any politicians who for years have talked about growth will find it difficult to suddenly abandon these goals. Such an act would either signal that the politicians had formulated the wrong goals at an earlier stage or that they had not achieved the goals set at the beginning. Both options are undesirable for a politician who relies on the trust of citizens. Conceptually this explained as goal dependency: policy objectives becoming 'sticky' over time: they resonate with dominant discourses and are reinforced through replication, rhetorics and prior investments in this path (Alves Rolo *et al*., 2021).

To summarise, goal dependency shaped by growth norms is a condition that seem to prevent local governments from planning for population decline. In this respect, we would benefit from studies that explore how radical shifts in policy direction can occur. Just as issues such as environment, climate, and sustainability have gradually entered local and regional policymaking, we might in time see a similar shift in how demographic change is framed and addressed.

Stigma and personal sentiments

An eight condition that may constrain local planners and politicians in planning for population decline relate to personal experience. In our field studies, we have experienced that many of those involved in local politics are deeply rooted in their community. Some have lived there all their lives and are attached to the place both emotionally and practically. Some observe ongoing population decline with a sense of sadness, or 'loss of place.' As commercial and public services disappear and local social life declines, most local politicians want to do all they can to help the place recover (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2020).

In a previous study, our research group found that emotions play a major role for decision-makers in Swedish shrinking communities (Syssner, 2018). Building on the extensive literature on the relationship between policy and emotions (Bennett, 2013; Ahmed, 2014), we asked questions about what triggers emotions in decision makers and how they believe emotions influence their decision making.

We found that while emotions are often seen as something less valuable than reason and knowledge, emotions are part of everyday life for local government leaders. It also became clear that there are hierarchies of emotions, with some emotions – such as joy and sometimes anger – being interpreted as strengths and something positive, while other emotions – such as sadness and worry – are interpreted as a sign of weakness and something negative (Ahmed, 2014). In our study, several respondents however spoke openly about feelings of sadness and grief.

Most likely, feelings of sadness and grief are exacerbated by the stigma associated with (severe) population decline. Several researchers have described such stigmatisation (Hospers & Reverda, 2015; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). At the individual level, there is a risk that both policymakers and residents of shrinking places 'internalise the perception of failure' (Sousa & Pinho, 2015 . p. 14; and; Meijer, 2020). At the societal level, the growth norm and the associated stigma of decline have made shrinking a political taboo (Syssner & Siebert, 2020).

In any case, both personal feelings and social stigmas seem to be an obstacle to proactively dealing with decline. In this regard, we need more studies that explicitly examine the role of stigma, emotions, hope, and grief in local planning and policymaking.

A lack of professional support

Yet another condition that helps explain why local planners and politicians seldom develop plans for population decline refers to a lack of expert knowledge or planning capacity. We know from previous studies that civil servants have a strong position in many remote, rural, and depopulating municipalities (Syssner & Olausson, 2015; Meijer & van der Krabben, 2018). Interviews with civil servants show that they often criticise politicians for lacking the political courage to make tough decisions and develop explicit strategies for adaptation (Syssner, 2014, 2018). But rather than merely endorsing this criticism, we should recognise that politicians often lack the professional support required to make explicit, long-term plans for adaptation.

Local authorities in small and shrinking communities often struggle to attract highly educated and skilled officers and planners. Additionally, officers and planners in these organisations frequently need to be generalists, as limited resources prevent them from focusing on specific issues or producing extensive reports (Syssner, 2018). Moreover, these officers and planners often have little formal training in addressing shrinkage or demographic adaptation, partly because the range of courses on demographic adaptation in the education system remains limited.

We have also observed that initiatives aimed at challenging traditional planning practices – such initiatives do exist – often focus on social innovation, self-organisation, and networked modes of governance (Meijer & Syssner, 2017; Syssner & Meijer, 2020). However, these policy experiments are costly and require the organisation to train existing personnel, which is difficult for financially strained organisations.

As a result, planners who are expected to provide professional support to political decision-makers do not necessarily know how to plan for demographic adaptation themselves. The inability of planners and officials to present both concrete knowledge and alternative conceptualisations of the municipality's situation may contribute to local politicians' reluctance to explicitly address the problem of depopulation. Empirical examples of how knowledge on population decline translates into planning practice are much needed.

Accidental success

A final condition that may help us understand the incapacity of local governments to plan for further depopulation has to do with those shorter periods of growth that many declining municipalities and regions experience.

In their study of European shrinking areas, Copus *et al.* (2020) make a distinction between three forms of shrinking: legacy, active and complex shrinking. Legacy shrinking refers to changing demographic structures (mainly ageing and declining birth rates) as a cause of shrinkage, while active shrinking refers to processes of out-migration, and complex shrinking is held to involve underlying socio-economic dynamics as causes of shrinkage. These distinctions are important to understand within the time scales wherein the effects take place: active shrinking has an immediate effect on the number of inhabitants, while legacy shrinking has a delayed effect and can even be accompanied by population growth in the short term. A lack of insight into or understanding of these underlying processes can have far-reaching effects on policy formation, and on its indirect successes or failures.

The forecast of minimal population growth in Dutch peripheral regions, led to significant shifts in future visions, and demonstrate how difficult it is to keep processes of population decline (or more accurately: change) on the policy agenda at local and higher-level governments. From our interviews with policymakers, we have found that they feel that we have now passed the state of crisis and averted active shrinkage. They also report that the previous policy discussion about shrinkage did not resolve any problems but only led to further stigmatisation of rural areas. At this juncture, we can observe a renewed tendency towards growth policies, with emphases on attracting businesses and labour to ensure economic viability and liveability in the long term.

This however may be severely complicated by the currently unaddressed dynamics of old-age immigration and declining pupil numbers.

A few politicians and policymakers are sensitive to these underlying dynamics and recognise the need to continue paying attention to the possible long-term effects of legacy and complex shrinking. Others claim victory for successful population growth, and relate that as a positive, anticipated outcome of earlier growth policies (Meijer, 2023). As a result, however, in most policy documents the issue of future population decline and change is at best flagged for but hardly incorporated into adaptive strategies.

We therefore need empirical examples from practice that show how local planners and politicians handle accidental or unintended outcomes. For instance, this could involve documenting cases where chance events have influenced local perceptions of decline and reduced incentives for adaptation.

Conclusions: a deeper understanding is needed

We know from previous observations that some local governments are more proactive in adaptation than others. But by and large, there is a striking tendency for local governments not to develop explicit strategies for dealing with depopulation. In this paper, we have argued that to overcome this inability, we need to understand the underlying reasons. By taking a relational approach to policy failure and by exposing the conditions behind policy failure, we can better understand that adapting to unfavourable demographic trends is easier said than done. Our theoretical framework helps us to emphasise four central aspects of understanding the relationality of failure.

First, given that failure is context-dependent, we argue that inadequate policies have more serious consequences in remote and sparsely populated areas than in urban settings. Often the local government is the only service provider and the most important employer in these areas. Furthermore, local governments in depopulating rural areas often have limited capacity to develop plans and policies, which implies that the ones they do produce need to be carefully designed (Meijer & Syssner, 2017).

Second, we want to reiterate that failure in our case is not defined by harmful decisions, but by the absence of decision-making altogether. In our research, failure is seldom not a matter of implementation or budget overshooting. The failure rather concern the ability to set the agenda to adequately address problems related to shrinkage, or they lack the capacity and institutional support to develop adequate strategies. Failures rooted in non-action tend to unfold gradually, becoming more pronounced over time while remaining difficult to identify, address, or reverse. When coupled with the slow-moving nature of demographic change and its associated challenges, this makes adaptation policies especially hard to assess. Nonetheless, as long as no deliberate effort is made to plan for future decline, the absence of action must itself be recognized as a significant form of policy failure.

Third, failure is a matter of classification, and therefore a political issue. Our observations show that there are no benefits for any of the stakeholders at the local level from acknowledging failure. Rather, local politicians fear that the stigma of shrinkage will accelerate processes of outmigration and will make their locality or region increasingly unattractive for investors and new in-migrants. They feel that they can only compensate

for this dynamic by claiming success or at least denying policy failure and its underlying problems.

In general, our study demonstrates that, for local governments, negative framing of the trends and consequences of depopulation does not contribute to formulating and implementing alternative policy strategies. While we have started out from examining failures, as a way to understand the incapacity of current governance strategies for dealing with decline, it also has become clear to us from doing so that local governments themselves are reluctant to draw negative conclusions about their future prospects or current policies. We have observed that negative terminology (like shrinkage, population decline, depletion of services and a strong focus on development restrictions) often leads to inertia, and to no policies being developed at all. The question is: how can positive or more neutral framing support and facilitate policy formulation, while also aiding realism about the severity of problems? This is not a new topic in the shrinkage debate. In other studies, we have seen many suggested alternative terms: smart shrinkage, rightsizing, local adaptive development, developing alternative local narratives that tell a positive story about the place. However, the fact that approaches labelled with such terms are not operationalised and implemented in regions facing population decline shows how difficult governing shrinkage is, not least in regions that are often historically left behind.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate that both researchers and policy advisors at the national and international levels do need to understand why it is difficult to tackle population decline at the local level. Without this understanding, we will not be able to give appropriate policy advice. In addition, local governments developing adaptation strategies will benefit from a more structured understanding of their own practice.

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