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How do we plan from here?

Innovative planning in rural areas facing (rural) demographic realities

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Abstract:

For many rural governments, the combination of population decline, ageing populations, low population density, an expected reduction in economic activity, and stronger competition for labour, presents complex and novel challenges for municipalities to fulfil their roles as community developers and service providers. In this situation, local planning is crucial to deal with these challenges and to find the necessary innovative strategies and solutions (Hagen, Higdem, & Overvåg, 2023). Earlier research shows that the most common response to shrinking in local planning is trivializing, where shrinking is overlooked and denied, and/or to try countering shrinking (Hospers 2014, Syssner 2020). This inability to plan with depopulation can be seen as a policy failure (Syssner 2020), as it does not adequately address these complex challenges, but rather hindered the development of other proactive and innovative strategies for dealing with decline. So far, much of local planning has not adequately addressed these changes, and there is a lack of approaches and models for dealing with demographic changes in realistic, yet innovative ways. This paper explores how a realistic and innovative planning approach (Hagen, Higdem & Overvåg, 2022) addresses demographic challenges effectively. Testing the Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, the RUPIL model for strategic planning in Switzerland, Sweden and Norway yielded promising results. The methodologic inspiration from PAR highlights the involvement and leadership of the people who live and work in the actual places where the cases are tested, and who experience the challenges and consequences of their rural realities (Cornish et.al 2023). We have applied the traditional researchers' role with an objective viewpoint using our knowledge while also taking on the role of action researchers (Argyris & Schön, 1991; Foote Whyte et al., 1991) collaborating with local authorities, organisations, and citizens. Despite being a small but contextually diverse study, it highlights the need for innovation in rural planning. we have discussed whether and in which ways a more realistic and innovative planning approach (Hagen, Higdem & Overvåg, 2022) meets the call to address the demographic challenges substantially and innovatively. The test of RUPIL as a model for

innovative and yet realistic strategic planning shows promising results. Simultaneously, we acknowledge the challenges from the evaluation, especially regarding conflicting interests in difficult allocation changes, and a lack of diversity in the innovative processes, which may hamper innovative capacity, and the aim of changing perspectives (Edquist 2005, Healey 2006, Powell & Grodal 2005). Also, we bear in mind that this is a small study with few cases, however diverse in contexts. We argue that the complexity of shrinking in rural areas supports a need for innovation in planning, including developing innovative planning models that provide new concrete solutions and strategies, and a new mindset of strategic planning and policymaking. The tight coupling between growth (in population) and development needs to be de-coupled; so, it is possible to plan and create (sustainable) societal development in shrinking regions without population growth. This implies confronting the complex challenges of ‘shrinking’ and planning for a positive future of resilient local and regional societies in collaboration and co-creation between planning authorities and civil society. In this way, the local politicians’, inhabitants, stakeholders, businesses, and NGOs may develop and suggest new and innovative strategies, means, and measures based on locally anchored understandings of the good life of the future, within what is a realistic framework. Such an intake of knowledge and a new mindset of a possible future offers a necessary framing for local policy and planning that can be successful. We have, by developing and testing the Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, RUPIL, contributed to the discussion and further development of innovative planning models for such areas.

Keywords:

Innovative planning, Local strategic planning, Planning strategies in rural areas, Spatial planning

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