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Hindrances, failures and personal sentiments: On the inability of local governments to deal with demographic decline

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Abstract:

Several studies have shown that local governments are unable to cope with demographic decline. This contribution seeks to provide a deeper understanding of why this is so. Based on an extensive review of the literature on the conditions for success and failure in policy development, and a detailed reading of previous studies on demographic decline, this contribution suggests that the reluctance of local governments to plan for municipal population loss is related to the following factors: the perceived potential benefits of growth, the reality of gradual change, the growth norm, the benefits of vagueness, external pressures, the target-dependency of growth policies, stigmatisation and personal feelings, lack of professional support, uncertainties about what constitutes a plan for adaptation, and accidental success. In conclusion, researchers and policy makers at national and international levels need to understand these factors if they are to provide relevant policy advice, and local governments developing adaptation strategies will benefit from knowing themselves better.

In planning research and adjacent domains, we can witness a growing body of literature dedicated to depopulation in Europe's rural areas (Hospers, 2013; Johansson et al., 2018; Panagopoulos and Barreira, 2012; Syssner, 2023). Typically, these publications strive to provide policy advice for local, regional and national governments, and in general, the recommendations made are to anticipate future decline, make use of local knowledge and potential and plan for future demographic adaptation (Copus et al., 2020; Panagopoulos and Barreira, 2012; Syssner and Meijer, 2020). Furthermore, scholars focusing on depopulation warn for the risks entailed by ignorance, continuation of current policies or a focus on attracting future growth industries (Beunen et al., 2020; Meijer, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is an established fact among researchers dealing with shrinkage and depopulation that policy makers at the local level avoid developing strategies to deal with long-term population decline (Bock and Haartsen, 2021; Schatz, 2017; Tietjen and Jørgensen, 2016). It is a common phenomenon that local governments try to prevent or reverse population decline instead of planning for it. Thus, the unwillingness or incapacity of local governments to plan for further depopulation decline is very well documented. This contribution delves deeper into the origins and mechanisms underlying this particular incapacity, rather than merely observing and acknowledging its existence, thereby offering a novel perspective on the topic.

The geographical spread for studies after local policy-making for dealing with shrinkage and depopulation has increased significantly over the past decade – now ranging from Siberia to the Australian Outback. In Northern and Rural Europe these trends (and research) are further amplified, due to long-term processes of ageing and peripheralization. As researchers on this

topic, we can take out from a significant repository of published and ongoing research materials, including in depth discussions on planning dilemma's for dealing with long-term population change. The main aim of this contribution is to understand why local governments are so eager to prevent or reverse population decline instead of planning for it. The research question is: *what conditions can help us to understand why local governments deal with depopulation in such a disorganised and non-transparent way?*

In this contribution, we address the inability to plan for population decline as a policy failure. Importantly, studies of policy failure tend to begin with defining what a failure is, and how and when we can conclude that it is indeed a failure that we are observing (Bovens et al., 2001; Dollery et al., 2006; Le Grand, 1991; May, 2015; McConnell, 2015; Peters, 2015a; 2015b). 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 (Bovens et al., 2001) and varies across cognitive and normative frameworks (Peters, 2015a, p. 172). We also regard failure as a relational concept. That is, failure arises in relation to intended goals, costs, benefits, time or target groups (Kay, 2016; McConnell, 2015).

In what follows, we understand the inability of local governments to address long-term population decline as failure in the following sense: there is a mismatch between policymakers' understanding of the consequences of population decline and the strategies they develop to address them. That is, depopulation is framed not only by us, but also by the local government representatives themselves as a troublesome planning condition. Local government representatives see the consequences of population decline as severe but fail to develop specific strategies or policies to deal with them. For some reason, long-term population change is often not explicitly addressed as a policy problem (Peters, 2015a, p. 13).

In our presentation we will further elaborate on understanding policy and organisational failure from a relational point of view. Furthermore we further address the conditions affecting failure when planning for shrinkage. This is based on our previously published research findings, complemented with other literature. We will specifically address those barriers that prevent depopulation from being treated as a policy problem that local governments should deal with. More specifically, we will try to identify the conditions that have kept the problem of long-term population decline off the agenda in so many places for so many years. Finally, we draw our main conclusions and reflect upon our main research question.

Keywords:

Shrinkage, demographic decline, adaptation, policy failure, local government

Thematic Area:

- Evaluation of policies and strategic plans
- Spatial planning

How will you present your communication if accepted?

- Oral presentation