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do dutch villages have a future?

Villages in the Netherlands are under pressure from demographic, social and political change, but **Gert-Jan Hospers** suggests that village life still has a future, because village living is becoming less about the facilities on offer than it is about residents' solidarity and villages' physical and virtual connectivity



Left

Thanks to Geert Mak's bestseller, the village of Jorwerd has become an icon of vanishing village life

Every few years the Dutch – just like their neighbours in the UK, Germany and Belgium – become pessimistic about the future of their villages. For example, in 1959 a study published under the title *Threatened Existence* set out fears that the villages in the northern part of the province of Groningen were in decline. In his 1974 publication *The Small Village: Odds of Survival and Future Prospects for Villages and Hamlets in Holland*, the sociologist Groot also voiced doubts about whether the quiet village life would be able to survive.

And nearly every Dutch citizen is familiar with historian Geert Mak's 1996 book *Jorwerd: the Death of the Village in Late Twentieth Century Europe*, in which he described the silent revolution in Jorwerd, a small village in Friesland, between 1945 and 1995. Increasing size and commuter lifestyles forced radical change on the village: the city gained the upper hand, retail stores closed, and

the community – once so tight-knit – finally disintegrated.

Now, thanks to growing Dutch media attention on population decline, the problems of villages are once again on the agenda. There are currently about 2,200 villages in the Netherlands – but for how long? Is there cause for concern; and do villages have a future?

Villages under pressure

The Dutch village problem is nothing new, of course, but recent demographic, social and political developments have given it a new dimension. Consider demography first. Increasing numbers of young villagers are entering higher education, which means moving to the cities, with women in the lead. Indeed, a Dutch journalist recently noted that 'Young women are flooding into the cities'. So the loss to the village is not just the young people

themselves, but also the children they will bear. This loss of young people has an impact on both local education and social life. According to calculations published by the Dutch Institute for Research on Public Expenditure, 900 village schools will have to be closed in Dutch rural areas between 2012 and 2015.

In addition, the average age of remaining village populations is increasing – partly, of course, owing to the loss of young people, which raises the average age, but also in part because we are, in general, living longer. This presents villages with new problems. How do elderly inhabitants avoid becoming isolated? Can they still live an independent existence in their own homes? Are care resources adequate? Over time, an increasing loss of the younger generations is likely to result in smaller resident populations and (as well as possible empty properties) the closure of shops and other social facilities and amenities.

Social changes are also putting pressure on traditional Dutch village communities. As automobile ownership increases, villagers are more able to travel further. Many now journey to the city and back nearly every day. Moreover, since the turn of the century the village has also become part of the virtual world of the mobile telephone, e-mail and the internet.

‘Quality of life was not determined by facilities like shops, schools and sports grounds... The key thing about facilities was not their availability in the village but their accessibility’

In some cases, the emerging virtual communities are defined by their geography, an example here being the digital village square, which nearly every Dutch village has. But physical proximity is often not necessary; rather, the internet user’s own preferences are what count, such as a shared hobby or a certain type of music. Geography gives way to biography. Sitting at the keyboard of a laptop, villages are connected to the global village. This has led to a broadening of the villagers’ horizons – a sort of ‘mental urbanisation’, in which the villager is increasingly coming to resemble the urbanite. What this emancipation also means, though, is that the villager is less and less prepared to contribute to the village community, something once taken for granted. They are all too busy, busy, busy.

Finally, villages are also affected by politics. The ‘nanny state’, ensuring the citizen’s welfare, is

increasingly coming into question in the Netherlands. Central government is currently shrinking and withdrawing from many tasks, and the question of whether facilities can be afforded is raised with increasing frequency, certainly in areas with shrinking populations. Whether inspired by the need to make cuts or not, the slogan increasingly seems to be: ‘Ask not what the community can do for you, but what you can do for the community.’

It is not only national government that is increasingly passing responsibility to the village populations themselves; local authorities are, too. Village councils are required to examine the future of their village and translate their plans into a vision of the village’s future or a village development plan. They also have to name the parties with whom they want to implement their plans. But ultimately, it is the local authority that decides the issue, quite often with disappointing results; government, after all, does not always speak the same language as the general public. As one frustrated village council chief put it, ‘We have to take the initiative, but we don’t have any say.’

Village pump politics

No two Dutch villages are the same, of course. One cannot compare Baexem in the south with Warder in the north, nor with Azewijn in the country’s east. The number of residents is not especially relevant; the village’s character is far more important. The residents are sometimes closely tied to the locality because they were ‘born to the village’. Other locales, on the other hand, act as dormitory satellites of nearby towns or cities and have attracted a lot of outsiders over the years.

Despite the differences, however, the visions for the future formulated by village councils are often strikingly similar: new starter homes must be built; more attention must be given to sports and social facilities; and the school – and with it the community – must be preserved. If you ask the villagers how they see the future of their village, they commonly think in terms of bricks and mortar, which is fine with the local councillors: they like investing in something solid, like a new building.

Can building new starter housing arrest the decline of a village? That is very much open to debate, since villages within a single region are often in competition with each other. Like elsewhere in Western Europe, the Dutch housing market is mainly a regional phenomenon, as only 7% of those who move in the Netherlands relocate from one region to another. So if a village succeeds in filling its new housing, it is likely to do so at the expense of a neighbouring village – this phenomenon may be called ‘residential cannibalism’.

It is therefore a good thing that some provincial governments in the Netherlands block unrealistic housing developments as part of their

responsibilities for town and country planning. For example, in 2011 the Province of Gelderland cut the number of planned residential housing units in the Achterhoek rural area from 14,000 to 6,000. Rigorous measures like this cannot be expected from local government officials. After all, they are accountable to their local constituency, not the regional government. It's a sort of parish pump politics – the water from the pump on the village green tastes best.

Village councils often fail to consider the regional scale. They discuss their own village as if it were fenced off from the rest of the world. Co-operate with the village down the road? That's the last thing you would want to do! In the 1960s the Dutch sociologist Van Doorn coined the term 'villagism' for the tendency of some villagers to think only in



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Many Dutch villagers are happy with the quality of their residential areas, as in the village of Norg

terms of their own village, even as the world outside is changing. And a lot of local politicians still persist in that attitude, pressured as they are by the village councils and afraid as they are of losing votes. As a result they tackle symptoms, rather than coming up with policies that are future-proof.

For example, each of the villages of Vriezenveen, Westerhaar, Vroomshoop and Den Ham in the municipality of Twenterand in the east of the Netherlands has its own library and swimming pool, all of which are in considerable distress. The facilities are too small to offer a quality service, so parents are increasingly taking their children to the swimming pools and libraries in the neighbouring town of Hardenberg.

Quality of life

A half-century after the appearance of the alarming *Threatened Existence* report, CAB Consultants once again analysed the situation in the

villages in the north Groningen countryside. The researchers asked 1,600 people in the declining areas how content they were with their quality of life – and found that the smaller villages in north Groningen are full of life.

Of the residents polled, 93% stated that they were happy to live in north Groningen. The quality of life in the region was found to be a consequence of the social cohesion in the villages: there is a lot of contact between neighbours in a tightly knit community, with local activities in which they participate. Quality of life was not determined by village facilities like shops, schools and sports grounds. What the people found important was that they were easy to reach by car. The key thing about facilities was not their availability in the village but their accessibility.

The Groningen results are by no means exceptional. Recent investigations in the Dutch provinces of Zeeland, Drenthe and Overijssel have found that the quality of life in villages does not depend on the facilities available. It has far more to do with the quality of the built environment and social factors.

For instance, take the village of Ossensisse in the province of Zeeland, which is in the Hulst local authority area. There are no more than 400 residents in the village, including some 50 children and teenagers aged under 15. The villagers live in spacious houses and they like it there. There are no shops, nor is there a school. Kloosterzande lies four kilometres away, with a supermarket, an elementary school and other such facilities. The parents take care of transport themselves and organise a variety of activities for the village children, such as play days, a carnival and a summer camp. The villagers are very attached to their village hall, where they get together. The Ossensisse villagers have insulated the building themselves and contribute to its upkeep.

In the view of the Dutch geographer Thissen, village facilities are in fact the result of the quality of life in the village. Villagers come together, take up the village as a cause, and as a result acquire facilities, which can be a shop, a community hall or an odd-job service. Elsendorp is illustrative in this regard: the villagers have adopted the motto 'Care for Elsendorpers by Elsendorpers' and have set up their own, alternative home-care system. And in Almen volunteers from the village run their own supermarket.

Not that things were always this way. In days gone by, in most of the villages in the Netherlands residents scarcely left the village, so the facilities influenced their quality of life. As village sizes changed and people became more mobile, many of these independent villages turned into residential dormitories. Increasingly, villagers are coming to regard a pleasant working environment and a link with the local community as more important than

the level of the available facilities. The quality of life as experienced does not correspond to commonly held assumptions. Not that a lot of village councils understand that: the cliché of an independent village is a stubborn survivor.

Mobility and the internet

People who live in shrinking villages must be able to reach the facilities they need every day, easily and safely; but you don't get very far in a dormitory village without a driving licence. For example, every household in the little hamlet of Niehove in Groningen has one or more cars. The villagers are used to driving out and back every day. When asked about the quality of life in their village, however, the villagers stated that they were unhappy about the safety of the roads outside the village. Their priorities included investments in road safety and maintenance of the roadsides and verges, which is not something one would immediately associate with a village in decline.

Village councils should perhaps inquire into their residents' mobility. Which groups are less mobile? Can they get a lift from car-owners? Does public transport fit the wishes of the local community? It was questions like these that revealed a number of interesting insights in Zeeland. It seems that bus drivers in the region are increasingly starting to

and those without. Telecommuters, for instance, very much like Gers (a half-hour drive from Toulouse), rather than other areas, because Gers has fibre optic broadband. The number of bytes per second in broadband connection has become a significant factor in choosing where to settle in France. In the Netherlands the internet is fairly slow in the more remote villages, too, which is a cause for concern for small creative businesses, such as architects, designers and consultancies, which need high internet capacity.

Innovations aimed at the ageing population also need fast internet connections, such as popular rural schemes like the 'wireless neighbours' project, which is intended to alleviate loneliness among the elderly. Professor Strijker, a Groningen geographer, is therefore right to plead for fibre optic connections to be laid throughout the Dutch countryside. It is only fast internet access that will prepare the villages for the emergence of cottage industries, new ways of distance working and learning, domestic automation and everything else that technology may serve up in the future. Of course, this raises questions over a 'digital divide' in access, but that is a nation-wide rather than a local issue.

Villages of the world

Dutch villages still have a future. The traditional village, where people live, work and take their leisure in isolation, has vanished into history; but villages have been incorporated into larger structures. Today's villager gets into the car or starts up his laptop to get in touch with the rest of the world. Village councils and local government would be well advised to bow to this reality rather than cling grimly to the cliché of the independent village. It makes much more sense to invest in safer roads and fibre optic broadband than to build new starter homes and keep the local swimming pool open, no matter what.

It is the well connected village, interacting with the world about it, that would appear to offer the best prospects for the future. Perhaps these modern 'villages of the world' might even succeed in attracting newcomers. After all, it is hard to predict migration patterns at a local level. A case in point is the area to the north of Groningen, mentioned at the start of this article: the area proved popular between 1970 and 1980 with returning emigrants and people in search of the quiet life, and the sombre predictions in 1959's *Threatened Existence* report never came to pass.

● **Gert-Jan Hospers** is Professor of Place Marketing at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, and teaches economic geography at the University of Twente. The views expressed are personal.



Pim van Tend

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Villages need to be connected with the rest of the world – but physical accessibility no longer suffices

suffer from a sort of 'loneliness syndrome' as they carry virtually no passengers outside peak times. As a consequence, the provincial government is now promoting car-sharing rather than expanding regional public transport.

The physical accessibility of shrinking villages is important, but it is not the only element. If a village wants to profit from interaction with the 'global village', then its digital accessibility is also crucial. In France, the countryside is now threatened by a division between areas with fast internet access