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Urban Shrinkage and the Need for Civic Engagement

Gert-Jan Hospers

The world's population is growing at great speed. Every day, the globe expands by more than 200,000 people; every minute about 150 babies are born.¹ In 2011, the world had 7 billion inhabitants, twice as many as in 1960. This population boom will continue, but it will be unequally divided across the globe. Already today, 90% of growth can be found in the third world. While the global population will rise in the coming decades, the EU is confronted with demographic shrinkage. The number of Europeans is stabilizing and will soon shrink. This population decline is caused by an excess of deaths over births. All European countries are ageing now, while the fertility rates in the EU are too low to sustain a stable population. Countries like Germany, Italy and Romania are at the forefront of this process. Are the Europeans too decadent to multiply themselves, as the American writer Laqueur ironically noted in his *The Last Days of Europe*?² Whatever the case may be, as a result of this demographic shrinkage Eurostat foresees that – without future inward migration – the EU will have lost 50 million of its inhabitants by around the year 2050.³

Against this background, this analysis focuses on the link between population losses and the local scale, i.e. the level of urban regions, cities and towns. After all, it is here that Europe's demographic shrinkage has been most obvious in recent years. Population decline is relevant not just for the well-known shrinking cities of Liverpool, Lille and Leipzig. Everywhere in the EU, regions, cities and towns, from old industrial areas and peripheral places to new towns and provincial capitals, are losing inhabitants. In this respect, Wiechmann and Pallagst refer to the Urban Audit of the EU (2007) which revealed that 57% of the cities and 54% of the urban regions in the EU had faced population losses in recent years.⁴ In Central and Eastern Europe shrinking cities are even regarded as the rule rather than the exception. What are the causes and the consequences of this development? How do local policy makers respond to it? What does population decline imply for urban governance? In this analysis we explore these questions and argue that urban shrinkage requires strategies in which citizens have to play an increasingly important role.

Causes and Types of Urban Shrinkage

The shrinkage of cities is not a new or unique phenomenon. In the past localities have always experienced population losses, for a multitude of reasons. Think of the Flemish city of Bruges where many residents left at the end of the fifteenth century. The canal to the North Sea silted up, Bruges' textile industry got into trouble and political problems arose. Due to this mix of natural, economic and political factors, the city lost its dominant position to Antwerp. Bruges shrank; Antwerp grew. Or compare the American settlements that attracted a lot of gold diggers in the Gold Rush of the nineteenth century – they are abandoned now as “ghost towns”. In their *Atlas of Shrinking Cities* Oswalt and Rienits identified no fewer than twenty one causes of shrinkage across the world.⁵ As a matter of fact, natural disasters, epidemics, water scarcity, mobility, demography, political transformation have all caused population decline in particular places in particular periods of time. In modern European literature urban shrinkage is often understood as a local manifestation of the interplay of one or more economic, spatial, demographic and political forces.⁶ The following macro-processes are seen as the main causes of urban shrinkage:

- *Economic transformation.* Economic progress and population growth are closely linked – and also the other way round. We can see this clearly in Europe’s old industrial cities, such as Duisburg, Charleroi and Taranto. Due to globalization and the rise of low-cost countries the traditionally strong manufacturing sector in these areas has got into trouble, notably since the 1970s. The process of de-industrialization is an on-going transformation process, involving company closures, job losses and social deprivation. The lack of economic opportunities has prompted well-educated youngsters to move out, on the look-out for employment elsewhere. This “brain drain” can induce severe urban shrinkage. Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow are cases in point: the industrial hotspots turned into “rust belts” with population losses of up to 50% within about seventy years. Some authors see economic transformation as the main cause of urban shrinkage. Oswalt, for example, defines shrinking areas loosely as “places where the losers of the so-called globalized economy live”.⁷



In the United States we can still find some “ghost towns” from the Gold Rush period

- *Shifts in urban structure.* Urban shrinkage can also be the result of spatial changes, at all relevant scale levels. On the European and national levels, for instance, economic activity is increasingly concentrated in large city regions, such as Greater London, the Øresund region and the Randstad. This centralization process is damaging ordinary cities in the rest of the country which miss out on investment and lose talents that go to “places to be”. This creates a “Matthew effect” (after Matthew 13:12): the rich become richer, whereas the poor become poorer.⁸ Within cities, however, people have increasingly moved to the suburbs from where they commute to work. Moreover, new commercial developments are often planned in greenfield sites outside urban centres. In some places, like Detroit, Oberhausen and Hengelo, urban sprawl has even led to neglect of the city centre and the emergence of “doughnut cities”. Note that this hollowing-out process does not necessarily mean that the city as a whole is shrinking. However, some neighbourhoods do shrink at the expense of other areas of the city. Shrinkage and growth usually go hand in hand.

- *The ageing of society.* With its ageing population Europe is literally becoming the “old” continent: in 2011, 17% of the population in the EU were aged over 64, whereas this was only 9% in 1960.⁹ Birth rates have fallen and people are living longer now. Within Europe, Germany and Italy have the “greyest” society. Some cities are really challenged by this demographic change, because of the lack of adults of working age to take care of the elderly who require more health services. Take the Italian cities of Venice and Genoa. Although Venice is a touristic honeypot site, the local population has shrunk dramatically over recent decades, leaving the elderly behind. Obviously, brain drain aggravates the greying of the tourist magnet, as the average age increases when young people leave. The same is true of the Italian port city of Genoa. Liguria, the region where it is located, is among the greyest areas in Europe: 20% of the inhabitants are over 74 years old. Between 1970 and 2009 Genoa lost 27.5% of its population.¹⁰ This is not only due to ageing, but also to deindustrialization and suburbanization. In reality, the causes of shrinkage are often interrelated.



*The ageing of society is clearly visible in the street, like here in Solingen
(photo: Peter Timmerman)*

- *Political transformation.* The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent opening up of Central and East European countries to the world market also induced a lot of urban shrinkage. The change in the political system from socialism to a market economy led to great transition problems and the exodus of young people to the west. The cases of Eastern German cities like Leipzig, Halle and Dresden, where all the aforementioned factors causing shrinkage came together, are well known. But Katowice (Poland), Ostrava (Czech Republic) and Timișoara (Romania) are also examples of post-socialist cities coping with depopulation. The membership of Central and East European countries of the EU resulted in a new wave of migration out. For example, when Poland joined the EU in 2004, many Polish people left their country to work in the UK.¹¹ They went to

regions where they could easily find work and that are located close to airports with low-cost carriers flying to Poland. In cities like Reading and Southampton thousands of Polish people now live and work. These cities are growing, but at the cost of the Polish regions the migrants come from.

The multi-causality of urban shrinkage is clearly reflected in a recent OECD definition: “A ‘shrinking city’ can be defined as an urban area – a city, part of a city, an entire metropolitan area or a town – that has experienced population loss, economic downturn, employment decline and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis.”¹² It is important to note, however, that besides urban shrinkage rural shrinkage is also a topical issue. In many EU countries, population decline can be found in the countryside rather than in the city. In France, Italy and Spain, for example, many villages no longer have a shop, pub or post office, while more and more houses and public buildings are left derelict because the people have gone. Even in a small country like the Netherlands, 80% of the shrinking areas is located in a rural region.¹³ The main cause of this rural depopulation process is obvious: the exodus of young people to urban areas. This is a classic case of rural-urban migration on which the English statistician Ravenstein based his famous “laws of migration” which date back to 1885.¹⁴ Thus, rural settlements have built up a lot of experience in dealing with depopulation. Over the years, they have come up with original solutions to respond to shrinkage, such as multi-functional accommodation, e-health and local services that are run by citizens. Interestingly, shrinking cities can learn from their smaller counterparts in the countryside. Therefore, we will also refer to examples from a rural depopulation context when we believe that they offer inspiration for urban shrinkage policy.

Urban Shrinkage and Its Consequences

There are different causes of shrinkage, each producing a different type of shrinking city. However, in agreement with the EU Shrink Smart project we think that there is one clear indicator for urban shrinkage: population decline, in a structural sense.¹⁵ The loss of inhabitants typically sets shrinking cities apart from other urban areas. Usually, cities experience population growth, with planners trying to lead the process in particular directions. In some parts of the city neighbourhoods are renovated and expanded, while in other parts new infrastructure, housing projects and facilities are built. Urban shrinkage, however, is an arbitrary and uncontrolled process that is hard to manage.¹⁶ After all, moving out from a neighbourhood, deciding not to have children and dying are individual events – they are not collective processes that local government can plan for. Owing to urban shrinkage more and more gaps emerge in the physical environment, scattered all over the place. This transforms a “compact” city or neighbourhood into a “perforated” area (see Figure 1).¹⁷ The overall picture of the city is still visible, but it is clear that there are pieces of the puzzle missing. In a growth situation, planners can add a neighbourhood to the urban structure in one go, but this is impossible in a shrinking environment. The process of shrinkage happens at random – it is a trajectory with its own logic.

Shrinkage: A Process of Cumulative Causation

Urban shrinkage is an example of what the Swedish economist and Nobel Prize winner Gunnar Myrdal in 1957 termed “cumulative causation”.¹⁸ He argued that once a negative development in an area has started, it is reinforced and thus leads to cumulative effects that make the situation even worse. For example, the closure of a factory in a city does not only induce job losses as such. It will also result in an exodus of workers, reduced demands for local goods and services, a smaller local tax base and

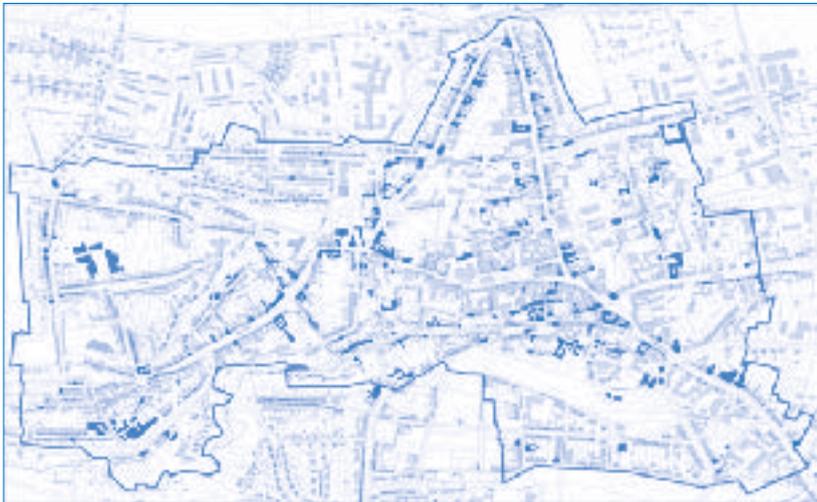


Figure 1 The perforated city: the dark spots indicate shrinkage in the physical environment¹⁹

growing difficulties in maintaining the local infrastructure. Furthermore, the downward spiral of spatial-economic deterioration is likely to be paralleled by problems in the social-cultural domain. Unemployment and degradation of neighbourhoods may lead to social isolation, resentment and tensions in the city. Myrdal called these self-reinforcing developments “backwash effects”. At the same time, he argued that there might be counteracting forces at work. Where localities shrink, other places grow. The territory in trouble might benefit from “spread effects” from growth areas. As time goes by, high wages, high rents and congestion problems in these growth centres could offer new perspectives for the shrinking area and a process of revitalization and re-urbanization could take place. However, Myrdal thought that the backwash effects tend to dominate the spread effects. Looking at empirical studies on urban life cycles, it seems that he was right: as the cases of Manchester and Leipzig show, cities can indeed grow again, but the trajectory of shrinking places is mostly path-dependent.²⁰

Impact on Hardware, Software and Mindware

The consequences of shrinkage for a city can be grouped into three categories. Population decline affects not only the “hardware”, but also the “software” and the “mindware” of an area. Below, we will explain and review these determinants of the urban fabric.

- **Hardware.** The term “hardware” refers to the visible, tangible and countable (hence “hard”) aspects of a city, such as the housing market, the physical infrastructure and the local economy. Traditionally these issues get a lot of attention. And it is true: shrinkage encroaches deeply into the urban hardware. Demographic decline means a challenge for cities to maintain the quality of life for their citizens and the public provision of education, health and public transport. Problems of unoccupied and unsaleable houses arise, schools and shopping centres have to close,

while firms decide to locate their business elsewhere. In many cities in Eastern Germany a lot of schools, nurseries, kindergartens and other child-related facilities have closed down. Fewer inhabitants also mean smaller municipal budgets, which puts pressure on the investments needed to upgrade neighbourhoods and guarantee the provision of public services. The reason for this is simple: fewer people means fewer opportunities for cost distribution. More and more researchers point to increasing problems in the technical infrastructure of shrinking cities, i.e. the supply of water, electricity and other utilities.²¹ Water pipes, for example, are fixed infrastructures, with fixed costs sometimes amounting to 80%. In a context of depopulation, the remaining users are faced with cost increases that are disproportionate. Moreover, risks of underutilization and related problems (e.g. increased corrosion of tubes and legionella) emerge. Because of this, residents of some shrinking cities already pay more now for drinking water.

- *Software.* While urban planners and economists focus on the hardware side of a city, geographers and sociologists are more interested in the people living there. How do they react to shrinkage and how do they deal with it? The “software” of an area includes the norms and values of local actors and the ways in which they act and interact. In general, shrinkage works selectively: it is the group of the young and talented that tends to migrate, leaving the elderly and underprivileged behind. Thus, the socio-demographic structure of a city changes. The brain drain of youngsters means that their children are born elsewhere, which results in the ageing of the local population. Take the city of Oporto (Portugal) which lost 21.4% of its residents in the last twenty years. With a population share of 20% of people over 64 years old and only 13% of people under 15 years it is a “greying” city.²² Empirical studies suggest that in ageing societies entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation emerge less easily.²³ This is a shame, because shrinking cities in particular can



*Shrinkage can also lead to socio-spatial polarization in some parts of the city
(photo: Lidia Shining Brightly)*

benefit from renewal. In addition, there is the problem that shrinkage weakens or even dissolves existing social networks in the city. Growth creates density and diversity and thus brings people together; shrinkage enlarges distances between people, both in spatial and social terms.²⁴ When many people are leaving, the commitment of the stay-behinds to invest in their neighbourhood can be frustrated. This lower community morale may foster fatalism and a lack of social energy, which hampers revitalization efforts. In Ostrava, for example, shrinkage led to socio-spatial polarization of certain areas in the city.

- **Mindware.** Besides the reality of the urban hardware and software the image of a city, in other words its “mindware”, is also relevant in a situation of shrinkage. The fact is that European cities increasingly compete to attract residents, businesses and visitors. As these target groups do not know everything when taking location decisions, they use whatever knowledge they have from previous visits, stories and media messages. A telling example is a remark of a former Dutch Secretary of State for Internal Affairs in 2010: in the media she simply declared that the Dutch should not buy houses in one of the country’s shrinking areas. Unsurprisingly, an image as a shrinking city is not helpful. Shrinkage is a negatively loaded word, just like “periphery” or “outskirts” (see Box 1). Things get even worse when the inhabitants of a shrinking city are influenced by these unfavourable views from outsiders.²⁵ They may start to feel inferior to the people living in “places to be”, which in turn discourages local empowerment. It would seem therefore that the Thomas theorem (“if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”) applies to shrinkage as well.²⁶ There is a sort of “communication paradox”: it is important to draw attention to shrinkage, but by identifying it you suddenly see it everywhere. All vacant houses and social problems in the city are considered to be an indication of depopulation then, no matter what their cause is. Emphasizing shrinkage thus can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Box 1 What’s in a name: shrinking or waiting cities?

Especially since the extensive international Shrinking Cities-project (2004), the concept of “shrinking cities” has become common property in Europe.²⁷ However, in contrast to growth that stands for progress, profit and success, shrinkage is mostly associated with decline, loss and failure. Meanwhile, some alternative terms have been put forward to avoid the stigma of the adjective “shrinking”. Examples are “lean cities”, “shifting cities”, “sustainable cities” and “waiting cities”.²⁸ The term “lean” suggests that cities should see shrinkage as a way to become more “lean and mean”: as if they lost weight and became healthier. The idea of “shifting cities” refers to the shifts taking place in the urban landscape – not only a demographic shift, but also an economic shift, i.e. the movement of people to larger, wealthier agglomerations. “Sustainable cities” are places that take the needs of future populations into account, something that is easier to achieve under conditions of shrinkage. Perhaps, the best alternative term for shrinking cities is “waiting cities” as proposed by the German planner Sulzer. According to him, “waiting cities are cities that wait, slumber, until their hidden values are discovered”.²⁹ The “waiting” metaphor points to the long-term perspective that is needed to understand shrinkage and deal with it properly. Although all the alternative terms make sense, in debate the notion of “shrinking cities” still dominates.

Policy Responses to Shrinkage

The problems urban shrinkage creates have triggered policy makers all over Europe to develop a number of strategies. Not just city authorities, but also housing corporations, developers and public service providers have tried to respond to population decline. Sometimes these measures are explicitly aimed at coping with shrinkage, while in other cases existing urban policies are intensified. In France, for example, there are no specific tools to deal with shrinkage – the phenomenon is viewed as “a silent process”.³⁰ In practice, we can identify four types of policy responses: (1) trivializing shrinkage, (2) countering shrinkage, (3) accepting shrinkage and (4) utilizing shrinkage.³¹

(1) Trivializing Shrinkage: It Cannot Be True

This policy reaction can frequently be observed in localities where shrinkage is not really yet visible. Policy makers are confronted with demographic projections that foresee that the city will shrink in the next few years or decades. Often the data are called in question, trivialized and brushed aside. A typical response in such a situation is to do nothing, simply denying that the city has a problem. Demographic forecasts, however, are more reliable than economic ones, because there are only three variables involved: fertility, mortality and migration. Moreover, demography works as a “supertanker”: once a trend has set in, it is difficult to steer away from it. It is not difficult to predict the development of the world population – after all, the potential mothers of the next 30 years are being born right now.³² At the same time, the lower the geographical scale, the less reliable demographic data are. Internal migration patterns in particular are difficult to predict. Do people move to city X, city Y or a neighbouring city Z? Therefore it is always useful to start with regional rather than local demographic projections, e.g. data for North Jutland rather than for its main city, Aalborg. Also many solutions for urban shrinkage can be found on the regional scale. And even then, it is not always true that “demography is destiny”. For example, who could predict that Manchester would become a magnet for the creative class after its decline in the 1980s? In short, the best way to deal with demographic forecasts is to consider them as directional rather than inevitable. Demographic data and their underlying trends can guide policy well. Still, as long as shrinkage is not a reality, it is hard to persuade policy makers of its relevance. Or, as it is put in the EU Smart Shrink-project: “The awareness of the challenges brought about by shrinkage developed only when related problems became highly visible.”³³

(2) Countering Shrinkage: The City Must Grow Again

In many European cities where population decline can no longer be denied, policy makers are trying to reverse the trend. The idea is that shrinkage is only a temporary problem that can be resolved by attracting new people and businesses. This market-based, pro-growth policy response is popular in many European countries, especially in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe (see also Box 2).³⁴ Attempts are made to stimulate population growth by means of new real property development, urban restructuring and place marketing. In the new member states of the EU, in particular, creative people have top priority on local authorities’ wish lists. According to Blažek and Uhlíř this can be explained by the “Lisbonization” of urban policy: Europe’s ambitious Lisbon agenda assumes a simple logic that whenever cities have an excellent knowledge and innovation infrastructure, the creative class will flow in.³⁵ For example, states in Eastern Germany have abolished tuition fees to attract students from other parts of the country. The Polish city of Sosnowiec is one of the many cities in Eastern Europe that tries to counter shrinkage with tax expenditure, tax relief and direct loans for high-tech firms. Roubaix, located in the French industrial region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, has a housing diversification strategy

aimed at “developing residential attraction in Roubaix for new populations attracted by heritage and cultural amenities”.³⁶ In turn, the city of Avilés in Asturias (Spain) is attempting to get rid of its old industrial image by investing in flagship projects (the Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre and a knowledge park called “Innovation Island”), accompanied by aggressive place marketing.



The Spanish city of Avilés hopes to counter shrinkage with flagship projects

Box 2 Villages for sale and subsidies to stay

In the European countryside, we can also find a lot of original attempts to attract newcomers.³⁷ In Spain, hundreds of villages are for sale. For example, in 2008 the village of Lacasta in the province of Zaragoza was sold for 189,000 euros, while the buyer got the remnants of a local castle for free. In 2009; the Swedish town of Lekeberg followed a real targeted strategy: it decided to raffle building plots among Dutch immigrants who announced that they would move there within two years. In the same year, the Austrian village of Rappottenstein gave away free plots to outsiders who wanted to start a family there. The municipality welcomed singles as well, provided that they agreed to search for a partner with the desire to have children. The peripheral towns of Sluis, Hulst and Terneuzen in the Netherlands have also employed innovative place marketing methods. Since 2008, they have been present at the annual Dutch Emigration Fair claiming that families looking for spacious houses do not have to move abroad. Why not migrate to the Dutch periphery, where people speak the same language? This initiative has been followed by the Dutch shrinking city of Delfzijl which advertises in the Dutch Emigration Fair to attract employees. Finally, islands near the coast of Croatia hope to increase their population by subsidizing new born babies: their parents get 10,000 euros, on the condition that they stay on the island for the next few years.

It is doubtful whether strategies to counter shrinkage by attracting new residents and firms work. First, many cities fail to think about their uniqueness: nearly all promote themselves as diverse, creative, innovative or liveable in. However, it is not so much about what a city has to offer as such, but what it has to offer that differs from its competitors that matters. Secondly, shrinking cities all compete for the same group of people. As a consequence, a successful housing or branding strategy in one place succeeds at the cost of other areas – a phenomenon called “residential cannibalism”.³⁸ Third, people and businesses are far less mobile than we tend to believe. It is a common finding in migration research that Europeans do not move house very far away.³⁹ Distance is the most important factor explaining migration decisions. If people move house, they mostly stay within the same city, and in any case within the same region. For example, the shrinking cities in Eastern Germany that are growing again, like Leipzig, Dresden and Jena, have been able to attract only newcomers from the region surrounding them. If people leave their region, it is often for private, study or work reasons. Of course, there are differences at different times in someone’s life cycle. Families and the elderly are more immobile than young, educated and single people. But, as research from Sweden demonstrates, the efforts of cities to attract this latter group are also largely ineffective.⁴⁰ If shrinking cities want to welcome newcomers, they had better focus on “return migrants” – people returning to their region of birth because of a sense of place. What applies for residents is also true for firms: they are also extremely home-loving. Among European companies, short distance migration is still the rule, and moving over long distances the exception.⁴¹

(3) Accepting Shrinkage: We Try to Cope with It

In the North West of Europe, policy makers seem to be more realistic in their response to urban shrinkage. Slowly but surely, shrinking cities in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands are tending to accept population decline as a fact of life. Instead of stimulating growth, they are trying to manage the effects of shrinkage and look for ways to stabilize population development as far as possible.⁴² The starting point here is not so much “how to attract people from outside”, but rather “how to retain the existing residents”. Typically, strategies are aimed at the improvement of the urban quality of life. There is a lot of attention being paid to measures to upgrade the “hardware” of shrinking areas. Often, new construction projects give way to the renovation of the available housing stock in accordance with Jane Jacobs’ maxim that “new ideas must use old buildings”.⁴³ For instance, terraced houses are combined and enlarged or get more car parks. Or older flats are provided with extra facilities like lifts, balconies or little gardens. This fits well with the trend of “ageing in place”, i.e. adapting houses so that people can easily remain and live at home when they grow older. In some cities, whole housing blocks are pulled down – like in the East German city of Schwedt where 5,400 flats have been demolished since the 1990s. The Germans call it “Gesundshrumpfen” (healthy shrinking), while the English refer to “planning for decline”. In the Netherlands, strategies of “slimpen” (smart shrinking) are gaining in popularity: for every newly built house in the region, two old houses are run down.

But even in shrinking cities demolition strategies are not always necessary. A neighbourhood in the Dutch city of Dordrecht, for example, was earmarked for demolition a few years ago. However, the municipality heard from the many Turkish people living there that the old housing stock perfectly satisfied their needs: the upstairs and downstairs flats enabled the grandparents to live near their children and their families. As a result, the city of Dordrecht decided to renovate the neighbourhood



Planning for decline is an euphemism for demolishing buildings, like here in Poznan (photo: MOs810)

instead of pulling it down.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is always important to pay attention to the “software” of an area when coping with shrinkage. What socio-demographic features does the area have? What are the needs of the residents? What problems do they encounter in organizing their daily lives? The results of such consultations can reveal useful insights for local policy, e.g. the wish to have better street lighting, safer cycle paths or more green spaces. In the shrinking city of Brno (Czech Republic) such a bottom-up approach has led to a focus on family support.⁴⁵ Making the live of local families easier is seen as the main solution to the city’s shrinkage problems. Since 2008, the urban authorities have subsidized what they refer to as “family cohesion” with measures to improve the home-work balance and the social inclusion of child-caring parents. In addition, families can get free advice and support at local contact centres that are part of the so-called “Family Point” project. For shrinking cities creating a child-friendly environment is a wise strategy, because it can be a decisive factor for local families remaining in the neighbourhood and thus prevent the further decline of a local community.

(4) Utilizing Shrinkage: There Is More for Less

“Great – finally enough space!”, “Demographic change as a chance” and “Slim is beautiful”. Not all of us see urban shrinkage as a problem. Notably planners, architects and consultants plead for a positive view on shrinking cities. Their argument is that a city’s quality of life does not depend on population density. “There is no proper size for the perfect city. In Scandinavia for example the quality of life is very good, while there is a very low population density.”⁴⁶ Indeed, many shrinking cities have used demolished housing blocks on which to set out green spaces that can be used for recreation or for “urban farming”. In the Dutch city of Heerlen, such “pocket parks” have turned out to be very popular among the locals.⁴⁷ At the same time, more and more shrinking cities, neighbourhoods, towns and villages in the EU are deciding to apply for membership of the international Cittaslow

network. This movement of “slow cities” – closely linked to the “slow food” movement that started in Italy in 1986 – aims at improving the quality of life, sustainability and diversity of local communities in our fast-paced, globalized economy.⁴⁸ Cittaslow attempts to take advantage of local qualities instead of going with the global flow. Other places have high hopes of the so-called “silver economy”: an ageing population may offer opportunities for the development of new services and applications in the field of living, leisure and care. Shrinking cities in the Ruhr Area, for instance, are experimenting with smart living concepts for elderly people. In this sense, shrinking cities are societal laboratories where new methods are tested that are also useful for growing cities. However, we should not be over-optimistic when it comes to utilizing shrinkage. In any case, the American model of Sun City is not likely to be the future for shrinking and ageing Europe. Examples from Belgium (Messancy) and Finland (Seniorpolis) demonstrate that setting up communities especially for the elderly is not very successful.⁴⁹



In some cities ‘urban farming’ is used to fill up demolished parts of neighbourhoods (photo: Linda N.)

Challenges for Urban Governance

Coping with urban shrinkage requires the involvement of many stakeholders. After all, population decline is a complex and comprehensive issue: it transforms parts of the city and affects all aspects of people’s daily life. In such a context, local government is dependent on the capacity of many other actors, varying from corporations, schools, business networks, local associations and citizens themselves. Thus, shrinkage is a “wicked problem” that requires urban governance. Urban governance may be understood as “a process of coordinating actors, social groups, and institutions to attain particular goals, discussed and defined collectively in fragmented, uncertain environments”.⁵⁰

Urban governance has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension. The horizontal one refers to the diversity of types of actors, groups and institutions involved, whereas the vertical aspect deals with the different administrative scale levels that play a part, from the European to the local.⁵¹ As a transformation process population decline resembles other urban governance issues, such as economic restructuring, social inclusion and sustainability. At the same time, shrinkage has distinct characteristics that pose some real challenges for urban governance.



Coping with shrinkage involves the cooperation of many local stakeholders
(photo: Lidia Shining Brightly)

- *From growth to shrinkage.* Shrinking cities do not fit well in a world addicted to growth. Since the Industrial Revolution Western societies have been used to the mantra of growth: three is not only seen as more than two, but also as something better. Growth and shrinkage are each other's mirror images: when cities grow, they lack exactly those assets (e.g. space, housing, facilities) that are abundant in shrinking environments. Growth involves scarcity, while shrinkage goes hand in hand with surplus.⁵² The enduring influence of the growth paradigm can be observed in policy responses to depopulation. In many cities, as we have already seen, growth strategies are popular; in some countries, like Poland and Romania, talking about shrinkage is still a taboo.⁵³ And even when policy makers no longer explicitly strive for urban growth, they try to create a context of relative scarcity: houses are demolished, infrastructures are removed and facilities are combined. Why not start with the surplus that shrinkage creates? Why not look for the opportunities an affluent environment might offer? Such a change in mentality, however, is blocked by our institutions. For local governments, growth traditionally means power and the chance to divide scarce space. Moreover, in planning laws and regulations growth rather than shrinkage is rewarded. Therefore, it is hard to say farewell to the growth paradigm.⁵⁴ This applies not only to local governments, but also to planners, architects and developers. They often feel that they are more original than their predecessors – with the result that too often old buildings are run down instead of being renovated.
- *From local to regional policy.* To manage shrinkage a regional view is needed. Shrinking cities are in competition with cities nearby, because housing markets are mainly a regional phenomenon: what one city gains is gained at the expense of one of its neighbours. In addition, cities and city districts are not fenced off from the rest of the world. Thanks to growing mobility Europeans

commute through a daily urban system that goes beyond local borders.⁵⁵ From this perspective, it makes sense to coordinate investments in physical infrastructure, business parks and public services on a regional scale, preferably the scale of “the region of people’s daily life”. However, implementing policies on a regional level is more difficult than it seems at first sight. The fact is that cooperation in shrinking areas is a typical example of the well-known “prisoner’s dilemma”.⁵⁶ The key point of this theory is that all stakeholders act for selfish reasons, although they know that cooperation does raise collective welfare. City government officials are not inclined to work in the regional interest, since they are accountable to their local constituencies. Often, there are also local sentiments: neighbouring cities are seen as suspect and thus help to create the city’s own identity (“us versus them”), a process that can be called “ordering by bordering”.⁵⁷ It is a sort of parish pump politics: the water tastes the same everywhere, but in the end the water from the pump on the local green tastes best. Therefore, often rigorous measures from higher levels are needed. In the Netherlands, for example, it is the provincial government that has the power to block over-ambitious investment plans from shrinking areas.

- *From backward to forward thinking.* Even if stakeholders accept depopulation and think on a regional level, there is a risk that only the symptoms of urban shrinkage will be tackled. The problem is that urban reality is often analysed using concepts and perspectives from the past, although the world outside has changed – a phenomenon Lefebvre denoted as “the blind field”.⁵⁸ Sound policies in shrinking cities, however, should not simply repair what has been lost, but start from a vision of city living in the future. Shrinkage forces cities to reformulate their goals and measures to achieve them. The possible impact of developments in the virtual world in particular should be taken into account. After all, information and communication technology is chang-



Information technology and an ageing society can go together well (photo: Alice Wiegand)

ing urban form and public services and is likely to do so even more in the future (see Box 2). What societal trends do we see? How often and why do people use the available facilities in their neighbourhood? How can public services be adapted to the future? For example, closing libraries in a city's shrinking neighbourhood and building a new library in the city centre sounds basically like a sensible plan. However, it might make more sense to invest in iPads and e-readers at local schools instead of investing in bricks and mortar. Thus, it is not the existing structure – a library as we know it – which should be the starting point, but the public goal, i.e. fostering reading among the local population. In order to facilitate forward thinking, planning laws and regulations should leave more flexibility for shrinking cities, so that they can experiment with new, future-oriented concepts.⁵⁹

Box 3 Shrinking cities in a “global village”

The virtual world of the mobile telephone, e-mail and internet has important spatial implications, although research on this issue points in various directions.⁶⁰ For one thing, information and communication technologies and broadband investments are creating a level playing field in Europe – even in the most remote village people can now be part of the “global village”. For another thing, there is still a “digital divide” in many countries, which is closely linked to spatial-social inequalities. In the United Kingdom in particular, more and more cities are realizing how important it is to be connected to the virtual world. Since 2006, Aberdeen has employed tele-care and other e-health services in an attempt to respond to the needs of an ageing population. For example, older people with health problems are monitored by a webcam at home. Manchester, too, is investing a lot in the digital world, notably in the city's multiple deprivation areas. There is a special Digital Development Agency running projects under the title of “smart citizens in smart cities”.⁶¹ With the “Fibre to the People” project the local government hopes to stimulate digital inclusion, which in turn should stimulate social cohesion. It is questionable, however, whether digitalization can solve problems in the real world. In Manchester, the social divide within the city is perhaps a greater challenge than the digital divide.

- **From power to empowerment.** Traditionally, the development of localities is based upon three pillars: the government (the public sector), the market (the private sector) and the civil society (the third sector).⁶² Each of these sectors has its own tasks and values, but for the proper functioning of society, they all need each other. The government creates laws and rules and is responsible for public order and public goods. In turn, the market is the arena for entrepreneurship, business and trade – thus, it generates welfare. Finally, the civil society offers citizens meaningful structures, networks and identities. In a shrinking city, however, a gradual shift of power will take place from the government to the market, and in particular to the civil society. The reasons for this transition are twofold. First, urban shrinkage creates an extra fiscal burden on local governments: due to demographic and economic decline earnings will be lower, while the costs of an ageing population and social deprivation will be higher. Second, not all problems relating to urban shrinkage can be solved by spending more public money. To upgrade the “software” and “mindware” of

places, local empowerment is needed – of course, money can help, but in the end it is the intrinsic motivations and energy of people that make a difference.

In the UK, the shift from public power to local empowerment has been captured in the term “civic economy”, that is “comprising people, ventures and behaviours that fuse innovative ways of doing from the traditionally distinct spheres of civil society, the market and the state”.⁶³ Ideally, this new form of collective action produces outcomes that neither the state nor the market could have achieved on its own. In this respect, the shrinking city of Ludwigshafen (Germany) is an interesting case. The municipality has triggered the setting up of more than fifty “social events”: groups (students, employees from local firms or members of the Rotary club) are volunteering for one day to help in urban restructuring, varying from painting buildings to renovating the local children’s farm.⁶⁴



In the United Kingdom there are more than 250 community-owned village shops (photo: Felix O)

Shrinkage and Civic Engagement

Since the financial and euro crisis, public pleas to empower a city’s civil society have mostly been based on cost considerations. From this point of view, citizens have to organize the delivery of public goods and services themselves, simply because government no longer has the budget to do so. This cheap argument ignores the opportunities of civic engagement as such. In the literature on urban policy the intrinsic value of citizen involvement has already been emphasized for many years, starting with the classic article by Arnstein.⁶⁵ The author recognizes the somewhat moralistic nature of the topic when she writes, “the idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you”. In her “ladder of citizen participation” Arnstein distinguishes eight forms to involve citizens in policy processes that directly affect their daily lives, like the restructuring of a neighbourhood or the closure of a swimming pool. As we can see from Figure 2, the higher up the ladder, the more participation there is. At the top we find the extreme situation that citizens are entirely in charge (citizen control), while at the bottom public actors simply manipulate citizens – in this case, it is not justified to speak about participation. In reality, most forms of civic engagement can be grouped under the category of “tokenism”, round the three rungs at the ladder’s middle: the civil society is informed, consulted or appeased. However, more and more studies list cases of successful citizen power.⁶⁶

The Benefits of Citizen Involvement

For areas that are faced with population decline engaging citizens more intensively may be the way forward. Basically, government and citizens have complementary resources which could jointly result in more effective and legitimate strategies (see Figure 3).⁶⁷ First of all, residents are the best people to tell one about their daily environment and its deficiencies – after all, they experience it every day. This streetwise knowledge on the spot is useful for policy makers who want to implement future-oriented measures. For example, inquiring of residents and bus drivers in the shrinking area of Zeeland (the Netherlands) revealed a number of interesting insights to public officials. It turned out that bus drivers in the region increasingly started to suffer from a sort of “loneliness syndrome” as they carried virtually no passengers outside peak times. As a consequence, the government of Zeeland is now promoting car sharing among the local population rather than expanding public transport. Second, by drawing citizens into the policy process or the delivery of public services, policy makers create more acceptance of unpopular decisions that follow from population decline. If volunteers have themselves experienced how difficult it is to run a library to which fewer and fewer people come, they are more likely to be resigned when it closes.

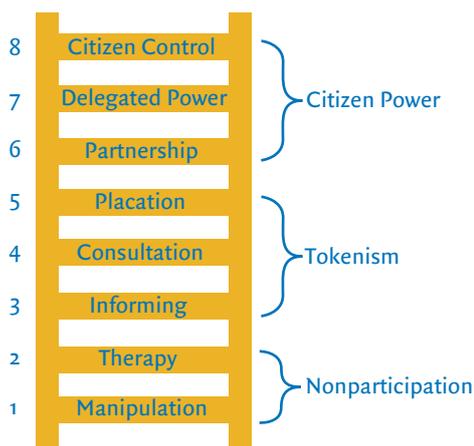


Figure 2 Arnstein's ladder⁶⁸

Government resources	Resources of citizens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - planning and regulation - majorities/consensus - subsidies/tax/licenses - land and real estate - civil service and offices - networks/contacts - legal and institutional knowledge and skills - control/consistency - credibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - time (pensioners, students, unemployed people, etc.) - voting power - money (e.g. private wealth) - media and public opinion - wisdom of the crowds - personalities/reputation - streetwise knowledge and learning-by-doing - intrinsic motivations/energy - creativity

Figure 3 A comparison of government and civil society⁶⁹

Third, citizen participation is intimately linked to the identification of people with their community. This “place attachment” not only motivates civic engagement, it also strengthens it. Civic engagement can be a “keep”-factor: residents who are committed to their community are less likely to move out. Finally, comparable with the argument above, the link between participation and social capital – networks between people and the trust and reciprocity to which they lead – works in both ways.⁷⁰ Ironically, urban shrinkage often brings citizens together in an attempt to prevent the deterioration of their neighbourhood. But a positive side-effect of this is that people get to know each other better, which in turn can lead to more social cohesion and an improved quality of life.

Citizen Power in City and Country

Perhaps the best known example of citizen power is the Swiss cantonal system of direct democracy: for centuries, citizens have been able to use their voting right to amend or veto laws, rules and spending bills in the canton they live in. On the urban level, the system of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre is often highlighted. In 1989, the city council introduced the tool of “participatory budgeting” in an attempt to tackle the city’s huge socio-economic problems. Since then, the residents have been asked every year to identify spending priorities, choose budget delegates and vote for proposals that the city consequently has to carry out. According to the World Bank, this method has certainly improved the quality of life of the local residents.⁷¹ The Porto Alegre model has been copied by a number of cities, towns and villages across the world. In Europe, too, more and more places, from Solingen (Germany) to Sevilla (Spain) and from Örebro (Sweden) to Plock (Poland), are adopting the participatory budgeting method.⁷² New media, like the internet and cellphones, are often used to collect and evaluate the plans that citizens propose. In Solingen – a shrinking and nearly bankrupt city – in 2010 the government asked its inhabitants via the internet which spending cuts the municipality should implement. For this innovative approach to citizen participation the city received the “European Public Sector Award 2011”.



The voluntary fire brigade in German localities is a great example of civic action (photo: Doris Anthony)

In terms of Arnstein’s participation ladder, however, participatory budgeting is not the ultimate form of civic engagement. It is true that citizens have a say in what government should do, but they are not in complete control. Moreover, the tool is not specifically linked to the context of population decline. For more far-reaching forms of citizen power in shrinking areas, we have to go to the European countryside. Over the years, population decline has prompted a number of villages to invent new ways of organizing public services responding to the citizens’ needs. In the United Kingdom, for example, there are more than 250 community-owned village shops. Meanwhile, a special organization, the Plunkett Foundation, has been set up to advise citizens how to open a village shop and run it with a team of volunteers.⁷³ In Germany, too, we can find such

an organization (DORV) with a consultancy function for citizens. In any case, Germany is a good model when it comes to voluntary fire brigades and community-owned buses. In many remote villages in the German periphery public transport has gone. As a result, villagers have set up a “Bürger-Bus” system which picks up the elderly and takes them on demand to a nearby city for shopping, swimming or a hospital visit. In the Netherlands, too, local volunteers help in keeping up the quality of life of their village. In Warder, active citizens raised 700,000 euros to save the community centre, while residents in Moerstraten built a new one with their own hands. Obviously, this is civic engagement par excellence!

In European cities a lot of civic action can also be found, although not always related to urban shrinkage. In London’s neighbourhoods there are many cases of citizen power, which has resulted, for instance, in the opening of an eco-friendly theatre and the re-opening of a sociable market. In the context of urban shrinkage, cities and towns in the German state of North-Rhine-Westphalia offer a great deal of inspiration too.⁷⁴ Residents in Mettmann who intend to do something good for their community can participate in special training sessions on active citizenship. In Hattingen citizens have initiated many projects to link the elderly with young people with the aim that both generations should learn from each other. In 2011, a local corporation and a company in Kerkrade-West (Parkstad Limburg, the Netherlands) hired unemployed youngsters to assist in the demolition of buildings in their own neighbourhood. This gave them a temporary job, but also led to commitment to the local restructuring plans. “Due to shrinkage we are demolishing a lot in Kerkrade. Often, we don’t build anything back. By involving people from the neighbourhood, they understand it better”, according to the manager of the corporation.⁷⁵ For other inspiring examples of civic engagement in Europe’s shrinking cities we refer to the cases in the remainder of this report.

The Need for CLEAR Strategies

In all the enthusiasm about the potential of civic engagement, it is important to remain realistic. Notably in shrinking cities there are some barriers to overcome before citizens can really take the lead. After all, how can one explain to citizens that they have to engage in their community, when at the same time the neighbourhood is deteriorating and the tariffs for utilities affected by shrinkage are rising?⁷⁶ In addition, there is the risk of what Hooghe has called the “sour grapes” phenomenon in citizen participation: just like the fox in Aesop’s fable imagining that the grapes that cannot be reached are sour anyway, citizens may pretend not to care for civic action, because that is “not for our kind of people”.⁷⁷ Another problem is a difference in expectations between government and the civil society. Public officials and citizens often speak another language, reflecting the different worlds in which they live – the daily life of a citizen is a different reality from the system world of a public official. This can create a lot of confusion, misunderstanding and irritation.⁷⁸ For example, citizens concerned about traffic safety in their street can come up with the idea that an extra pedestrian crossing might be desirable. After a meeting in the community centre, they go to the city hall to ask for support. However, after a month an official at the municipality sends a letter in which the request is refused, referring to the local policy that crosswalks are not allowed in this type of street. Impersonal treatments and oversimplified reactions like “these are the rules” frustrate any form of local empowerment. Government officials must also engage themselves when they want to engage the civil society as a whole.⁷⁹

Towards a Guaranteeing Government

Urban shrinkage demands a rethink of the role of local government. What, in a shrinking environment, are “public” goods and “public” services, and which of these can be left to the responsibility of the civil society? Typically, city officials are somewhat vague about such sensitive issues. It is certainly difficult to say in general terms what government must guarantee anyway and what citizens in principle could do on their own. But it is always possible for a municipality to define a minimum package of public delivery, or at least a system of different gradations of public involvement. By way of illustration, think of the following: the council of a shrinking city in financial trouble can decide to guarantee citizens in shrinking neighbourhoods the proper working of utilities (e.g. water and electricity), street lighting, rubbish collection, a broadband internet connection and easy access to health care, education and cultural facilities in the city centre. Anything above this minimum has to be achieved by the local government and citizens together. At the same time, there are also cases imaginable (e.g. the organization of a neighbourhood party) where citizens themselves can be considered to be the only actors in charge (see Figure 4).⁸⁰ In other words, more clarity is needed about the ownership of problems in shrinking cities and what this means for the division of tasks between the public sector and the civil society.

Type of initiative	Division of tasks between citizens and government
C (citizens)	Grassroots initiative that citizens can bring about themselves (e.g. organizing a neighbourhood party); there is no government role needed
C+G (citizens + government)	Grassroots initiative, where public involvement is needed for its realization (e.g. creating framework conditions or guaranteeing quality)
G+C (government + citizens)	Public initiative, where civic involvement (e.g. consultation or partnership) is needed for its realization

Figure 4 Different modes of involvement by government and citizens⁸¹

Towards an Activating Government

Preaching civic engagement in shrinking cities is not enough – it must go hand in hand with public measures to enable citizens to assume power. Or, as Neu puts it: “As long as citizen engagement is misunderstood solely as a stopgap to take the place of disappearing government services, an active civil society will have no potential to develop.”⁸² Therefore, local (and also national!) governments must be willing to delegate tasks, resources and responsibilities to the civil society. For this, a flexible approach towards existing regulation is often necessary. How can city councils expect citizens to become active if the rules work against such an engagement? When citizens are taken seriously and empowered in their initiatives, they are also prepared to take responsibility. This can be observed in shrinking areas in Finland. Here, it is a tradition that local policy makers, teachers and parents discuss how to organize education for the children in their community. Where should the school be located, or is a mobile school also an option? Do our pupils have to commute or should we let teach-

ers do that? How can the internet support educational goals? This “public-civic partnership” has generated good results: 40% of the schools in Finland have only fifty pupils or fewer, while the quality of the country’s education system is excellent.⁸³ This local empowerment is possible only because Finnish regions enjoy a great deal of autonomy. Likewise, shrinking cities should be less strict when it comes to regulation. The starting-point of local policy should not be “what is possible within the existing rules?”, but “how can we facilitate citizens as much as possible in their efforts to improve the quality of life?”. In short, shrinking cities need clarity: citizens have to know where they stand. The CLEAR approach may be useful in putting this message into practice.⁸⁴ It can function as a “checklist” for local governments that want to encourage civic action. CLEAR means that citizen participation works best when citizens:

- *Can do* (have enough knowledge, skills and resources to participate);
- *Like to* (act from a “sense of place” and belief in the community);
- *Are Enabled to* (are well-supported by government to participate);
- *Are Asked to* (are approached actively by stakeholders to join in);
- *Are Responded to* (can see that their activities make a difference).

As this checklist suggest, the encouragement of civic engagement in shrinking cities does not stop once the latter has been facilitated. It is important for local government to give feedback to active citizens, so that they know how their initiatives are evaluated. Celebrating the results of civic action with an annual engagement award or another prize might be an apt instrument for providing such feedback.⁸⁵ At the same time, this can motivate other stakeholders to join in.

Summary and Conclusion

In Europe the phenomenon of shrinking cities – cities confronted with population decline in a structural sense – seemed to be limited to exceptional cases like Liverpool, Lille and Leipzig. Demographic shrinkage, however, can be found in places all over the continent, from the Spanish countryside to Scandinavia and from English smokestack towns to Estonian villages. Urban shrinkage can be understood as a local manifestation of several macro-processes, including economic and political transformation, the ageing of society and shifts in urban structure. Unlike its variety of causes, the consequences of urban shrinkage are quite similar: not just the hardware (spatial-economic structure) of a city, but also its software (social-cultural fabric) and mindware (image) are likely to deteriorate. This process, in turn, can lead to a downward spiral. What are suitable policy responses for dealing with this? In any case, trivializing shrinkage by simply denying it is not a sensible idea. Trying to counter or to utilize it with growth and marketing strategies will also lead to disappointing results. The best strategy for shrinking cities is to accept shrinkage and improve the quality of life for the existing residents. In other words, try to avoid the stay-behinds moving out as well.

Coping with urban shrinkage is a governance process in which many actors, such as local government, corporations, schools, business networks, local associations and – last but not least – citizens, have a role to play. Ideally, the joint strategies of these stakeholders are shrinkage-proof, start from a regional view and take advantage of the digitalization of society. Due to the fiscal burden of urban shrinkage – complemented by the financial and euro crisis – local government will be more and more dependent on the willingness of the market and especially the civil society to give a helping hand. To

cope with urban shrinkage the participation of citizens is needed, all the more so because they have streetwise knowledge on the spot. There are several forms of citizen participation, with consulting and informing being common practice at the moment. In shrinking cities, it is inevitable that at some point citizens will also have to make use of their own resources to improve the local quality of life. Experiences with community-owned services in Europe's rural settlements show that there is indeed ample room for citizen power. Shrinking cities can learn from such examples. Civic engagement, however, is not something that can be dictated. If city councils want citizens to care for their community, they must enable them to do so. Civic engagement requires the engagement of local government as well. After all, it takes two to tango.