
Original Article

Coping with shrinkage in Europe's cities and towns

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Abstract An increasing number of cities and towns in Europe are facing population decline. In this article we focus on the challenges of this urban shrinkage process from a policy perspective. After a short review of the main causes and consequences of urban shrinkage in Europe, two common public policy responses are identified and evaluated: counteracting shrinkage and accepting shrinkage. Arguing that the latter is the most suitable approach, we recognise that coping with population decline is a complex urban governance process in which citizens inevitably have to play an important role. In shrinking environments, however, people are not always prepared to engage for their community. If policymakers want citizens to care for their community, they must enable them to do so. This may require a rethink of the specific tasks and roles of local government in Europe's shrinking cities and towns.

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Introduction

Population decline ranks high on the policy agendas of many of Europe's cities and towns. In the 1990s, it seemed that this phenomenon of 'urban shrinkage' only applied to the well-known cases of Liverpool, Lille and Leipzig. But now right across Europe urban areas – from industrial cities and peripheral towns to provincial capitals and new towns – are losing inhabitants. Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012) note that 57 per cent of cities and 54 per cent of urban regions in the European Union faced population losses in recent years. In Central and Eastern Europe shrinking cities are even considered to be the rule rather than the exception. Or as Turok and Mykhnenko (2007, p. 165) put it: 'Growth and revival are more common in Western Europe and decline is more widespread in the East'. According to Eurostat (2011), the European Union as a whole may have lost 50 million inhabitants by the year 2050, due to deaths outnumbering births. This shrinkage process can be only stopped with the help of immigration from outside the European Union (Klingholz, 2011). All European countries are

ageing now, while fertility rates on the continent are too low to sustain a stable population.

Against this background, this article focuses on urban shrinkage from a European perspective. First, the causes of population decline and its consequences for the urban fabric are briefly discussed. Then we turn to the ways in which shrinking cities and towns in Europe respond to population decline. We then explore what shrinkage implies for urban governance. Obviously, due to the fiscal burden of depopulation, local government will be increasingly dependent on the willingness of civil society to give a helping hand. We therefore see community engagement as the main challenge for shrinking environments. Finally, the article argues that the authorities of Europe's shrinking cities and towns should enable their citizens to care for their own communities as far as possible.

The Multi-Causality of Urban Shrinkage

In their *Atlas of Shrinking Cities*, Oswalt and Rieniets (2006) have identified at least 21 causes

of shrinkage across the world. In most contributions to the literature, however, urban shrinkage is understood as a local manifestation of the interplay of one or more economic, spatial, demographic and political forces (Lampen and Ozwar, 2008; Rink *et al*, 2010b; Reckien and Martinez-Fernandez, 2011). The following macro-processes are regarded as the main causes for urban shrinkage in a European context.

Economic transformation

Economic decline and population decline are closely linked (Friedrichs, 1993). We can see this clearly in old industrial cities and towns in Western Europe, such as Duisburg, Charleroi and Heerlen. Owing to globalisation and the rise of low-cost countries, the strong manufacturing sector in these areas has faced difficulties, most notably since the 1970s. De-industrialisation is an ongoing process involving company closures, job losses and social deprivation. Lack of economic opportunities prompts well-educated young people to move out and find employment elsewhere. Some authors see economic transformation as the main cause of urban shrinkage (Friedrichs, 1993; Oswalt, 2005). Oswalt (2005), for example, defines shrinking areas as 'places where the losers of the so-called globalised economy live'.

Changes in urban structure

Urban shrinkage can also be the result of spatial changes, at all scale levels. In Europe, economic activity is increasingly concentrated in large city regions, such as Greater London, the Øresund region and the Randstad. This centralisation process is damaging 'ordinary' cities and towns: they miss out on investment and lose talents that go to the 'places to be' (Florida, 2002). Within cities and towns, people have increasingly moved to the suburbs, from where they commute to work. Moreover, new commercial developments are often planned on greenfield sites outside urban centres. In some places – Oberhausen in the Ruhr Area is an exemplar – urban sprawl has even led to a neglect of the city centre and the emergence of 'doughnut cities' (Davenport, 2003). However, this hollowing-out process does not necessarily mean that a city or town as a whole is shrinking.

The ageing of society

With its ageing population, Europe is literally becoming the 'old' continent: in 2011, 17 per cent of the population of the EU were aged over 64, compared with only 9 per cent in 1960 (Eurostat, 2011). Birth rates have fallen and people are living longer. Within Europe, Germany and Italy have the 'greyest' societies. Some cities and towns have real problems dealing with this demographic challenge, with a lack of adults of working age to care for the elderly who require more health services (see Figure 1). Take the Italian port city of Genoa. Liguria, the region within which it is located, is among the greyest areas in Europe: 20 per cent of the inhabitants are over 74 years old. Between 1970 and 2009 Genoa lost 27.5 per cent of its population (Bernt *et al*, 2012). This is due not only to ageing, but also to deindustrialisation and suburbanisation. As this example demonstrates, urban shrinkage is often a multi-causal process.

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 urban shrinkage. The transformation of the political system from socialism to a market economy led to great transition problems and an exodus of young people to the west. East



Figure 1: The British elderly people crossing sign is also valuable for Europe's shrinking cities and towns (picture: Fry, 1989).

German cities like Leipzig, Halle and Dresden are well-known examples of cities demonstrating this post-socialist transition pattern (Steinführer and Haase, 2007). Katowice (Poland), Ostrava (Czech Republic) and Timișoara (Romania) are also examples of post-socialist cities confronted with depopulation. Central and East European countries joining the EU resulted in a new wave of young people migrating out. For example, when Poland joined the EU in 2004 many Polish people left their country to work in the United Kingdom (Browne, 2011).

The Consequences of Urban Shrinkage

Despite its multi-causality, there is one clear indicator for urban shrinkage: population decline, in a structural sense (Rink *et al*, 2010b). The loss of inhabitants typically sets shrinking cities and towns apart from other urban areas. Table 1 lists some examples of shrinkage in European cities and towns. As the table demonstrates, the intensity of depopulation throughout Europe varies. Some cities are confronted with shrinkage over a long period of time (for example, Liverpool), while other areas (for example, Heerlen) have been facing it for only a few years. There is also a difference between urban decline in Western Europe (for instance, Genoa) and in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe (for example, Ostrava): in the latter case, shrinkage should be seen as part of the transition from socialism to a market economy. Finally, it is important to note that rural shrinkage is also a topical issue. Everywhere in the European countryside, but particularly on the periphery of the continent, towns and villages are shrinking, from the south of Spain to the north of Sweden. 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 (Woods, 2005).

Usually, cities and towns experience population growth and planners try to lead the process in particular directions. Neighbourhoods are renovated and expanded, while at the same time new infrastructure, housing projects and facilities are built. Urban shrinkage, however, is an uncontrolled process that is hard to manage (Reverda, 2011). After all, moving out of a neighbourhood, deciding not to have children or dying are individual events – they are not collective processes that local government can plan for. With urban shrinkage, more and more gaps emerge in the physical environment, scattered across the area. This transforms a ‘compact’ city, town or neighbourhood into a ‘perforated area’ (Beeck, 2011).

Urban shrinkage is an example of what the Swedish economist Myrdal (1957) termed ‘cumulative causation’. 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. 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 (Benneworth *et al*, 2006). Below, we will explain and review these determinants of the urban fabric.

Impact on the urban hardware

Shrinkage encroaches deeply into the urban hardware, that is, the visible, tangible and countable (hence ‘hard’) aspects of a locality, such as the housing market, the physical infrastructure and the local economy. Demographic decline creates challenges for cities and towns in maintaining quality of life and public provision of education, health and public transport. Houses

Table 1: Examples of shrinkage in European cities and towns

	<i>Shrinkage period</i>	<i>Estimated population size at the end of the observed period</i>	<i>Annual change in %</i>	<i>Total change in %</i>
Liverpool	1931–2008	435 900	–0.64	–49.1
Leipzig	1933–2008	515 500	–0.37	–27.8
Genoa	1970–2009	610 800	–0.70	–27.5
Oporto	1991–2011	237 600	–1.07	–21.4
Ostrava	1990–2009	306 000	–0.40	–7.6
Timioara	1990–2009	312 100	–0.59	–11.2
Heerlen	2000–2010	89 000	–0.64	–6.4

Sources: Rink *et al* (2010b), Martinez-Fernandez *et al* (2012).



are unoccupied and unsaleable, schools and shopping centres have to close, while firms decide to locate their businesses 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 mean fewer opportunities for cost distribution. More and more researchers point to increasing problems in the technical infrastructure of shrinking cities and towns, that is, the supply of water, electricity and other utilities (Kocks, 2007; Rink *et al.*, 2010a; Neu, 2011). Water pipes, for example, are fixed infrastructure, with fixed costs sometimes amounting to 80 per cent of total costs. Because of this, residents of some shrinking cities in Germany now pay more for drinking water than they used to.

Impact on the urban software

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: the young and talented tend to migrate, leaving the elderly and underprivileged behind. Thus, the socio-demographic structure of a city or town changes. The brain drain of youngsters means that their children are born elsewhere, which results in an ageing of the local population. Empirical studies suggest that in ageing societies, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation emerge less easily (Rodríguez-Pose, 1999). This is a shame, because shrinking environments in particular can benefit from renewal. In addition, shrinkage weakens or even dissolves existing social networks. When many people are leaving, the local commitment of those who stay behind can be frustrated (see Figure 2). This lower community morale may foster fatalism, which hampers revitalisation efforts. For example, in Ostrava (Czech Republic) shrinkage led to socio-spatial polarisation of certain areas in the city (Rink *et al.*, 2010a).

Impact on the urban mindware

The image of a city, in other words its 'mindware', is also relevant in a shrinkage situation. A telling example is a remark by the former Dutch Secretary



Figure 2: Urban shrinkage may lead to socio-spatial polarisation (picture: Lidia Shining Brightly).

of State for Internal Affairs in 2010: she 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'. Things get even worse when the inhabitants of a shrinking city are influenced by these unfavourable views (Bose and Wirth, 2006). They might start to feel inferior to the people living in 'places to be', which in turn discourages local empowerment. 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 come to be considered an indication of depopulation, no matter what their cause. Emphasising shrinkage can thus work as a self-fulfilling prophecy. To avoid this, alternative concepts have been put forward, like 'waiting cities' and 'lean cities', although the notion of 'shrinking cities' is still dominant (Sulzer, 2007).

How to Deal With Urban Shrinkage?

The problems urban shrinkage creates have triggered policymakers all over Europe to develop policy responses. City authorities, 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’ (Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2009). We can group the policy responses into two broad categories: (1) counteracting shrinkage and (2) accepting shrinkage (Hospers, 2010; Verwest, 2011; Rink *et al*, 2012).

Counteracting shrinkage: Focusing on growth again

Generally, it is hard to persuade policymakers that urban shrinkage is a structural problem. Often action is only taken when population decline can no longer be denied. A common response by policymakers is to try to reverse urban shrinkage. Their policy view is that depopulation is 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 cities and towns, especially in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe (Hospers, 2010; Bernt *et al*, 2012). Attempts are made to stimulate population growth by means of new property development and urban restructuring to upgrade the city’s ‘hardware’ and ‘software’. Place marketing is used to improve the city’s ‘mindware’. In the new EU member states, attracting the creative class (Florida, 2002) is top of local authorities’ wish lists. According to Blažek and Uhlír (2007), this can be explained by the ‘Lisbonisation’ of urban policy: Europe’s ambitious Lisbon agenda assumes a simple logic that whenever cities and towns have an excellent knowledge and innovation infrastructure, the creative class will flow in. 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 trying to counteract 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 a residential attractiveness in Roubaix for new populations attracted by heritage and cultural amenities’ (Miot, 2012). The city of Aviles (Spain) is trying to get rid of its old industrial image by investing in flagship projects (the Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Center and a knowledge park), accompanied by aggressive place marketing.

It is doubtful whether strategies to counteract shrinkage by attracting new residents and firms work. First, many cities and towns fail to think about their uniqueness: nearly all promote themselves as diverse, creative, innovative or ‘liveable’. However, it is not so much what a place has to offer, but what it has to offer that differs from its competitors that matters. Secondly, shrinking cities and towns 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. In the particular context of shrinkage, this phenomenon of zero-sum inter-urban competition has been called ‘residential cannibalism’ (Die Welt, 2006). 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 very far (Dahl and Sorenson, 2010; David *et al*, 2010; Latten and Kooiman, 2011). Distance is the most important factor in migration decisions. If people move house, they mostly stay within the same city or town or at least within the same region. This is also the case in shrinking regions. For example, the once shrinking cities in Eastern Germany that are now growing again, like Leipzig, Dresden and Jena, have only been able to attract 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 moments 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 largely ineffective (Hansen and Niedomsyl, 2009). If shrinking cities want to welcome newcomers, they need to focus on ‘return migrants’ – people returning to their region of birth because of a sense of place. What is true for residents is also true for firms: they are home-loving. Among European companies, short distance migration is still the rule and moving over long distances the exception (Mariotti, 2005; van Oort *et al*, 2007).

Accepting shrinkage: Trying to make the best of it

In the North-West of Europe, policymakers seem to be more realistic in their response to urban shrinkage. Slowly but surely, shrinking cities and towns 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 stabilise the population (Rink *et al.*, 2012). The starting point here is not so much how to attract new people but rather how to retain the existing residents. Typically, strategies are aimed at improvement in urban quality of life. A lot of attention is paid to measures to upgrade the 'hardware' of shrinking areas. Often, new construction projects give way to renovation of the available housing stock in accordance with Jane Jacobs' maxim that 'new ideas must use old buildings' (Jacobs, 1961). 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 within the trend of 'ageing in place', that is, 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. The Germans call it 'Gesundshrumpfen' (healthy shrinking), while the English refer to 'planning for decline' (see Figure 3). In the Netherlands, strategies of 'slimpen' (smart shrinking) are gaining in popularity: for every new built house in the region, two old houses are pulled down.

But even in shrinking cities and towns, demolition strategies are not always necessary. A neighbourhood in the Dutch town 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 above their children and their families. As a result, the municipality of

Dordrecht decided to renovate the neighbourhood instead of pulling it down (Hospers, 2010). It is 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 organising their daily lives? The results of such consultations can reveal useful insights for local policy, for example, 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 (Schmeidler, 2012). Making the lives of local families easier is seen as the main solution to the city's shrinkage problem. Since 2008, the urban authorities have subsidised what they refer to as 'family cohesion', with measures to improve family-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 and towns, creating a child-friendly environment is a wise strategy, since it can be a decisive factor for young families deciding to remain in the neighbourhood. Families are an important asset for a neighbourhood, because they can play an important role in community building (McKnight and Block, 2010).

Challenges for Urban Governance

Coping with urban shrinkage requires the involvement of many stakeholders. After all, population decline is a comprehensive issue: it transforms parts of a city, town or neighbourhood and affects all aspects of people's daily lives. In such a context, local government depends on the capacity of many other actors, including corporations, schools, business networks, local associations and citizens themselves. Thus, shrinkage is a complex 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' (Borraz and Le Galès, 2010). Urban governance has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal aspect refers to the diversity of actors, groups and institutions involved, whereas the vertical aspect deals with the different administrative levels that play a part, from the European to the local (Rink *et al.*, 2011).



Figure 3: Planning for decline is an euphemism for demolishing buildings (picture: MOs810).

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. These are discussed below.

From growth to shrinkage

Shrinkage does 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 seen not only as more than two, but also as better. The enduring influence of the growth paradigm can be observed in policy responses to depopulation. In many cities and towns, as discussed previously, growth strategies are popular; in some countries, like Poland and Romania, talking about shrinkage is still a taboo (Rink *et al*, 2011). And even when policymakers no longer strive for growth, they try to create a context of relative scarcity: houses are demolished, infrastructures are removed and facilities are combined. It might be more useful to start with the surplus that shrinkage creates and look for the opportunities of an affluent environment, such as ‘urban farming’ that can be seen in some American cities (see Figure 4). Such a change in mentality, however, is often blocked by our institutions. For local governments, growth traditionally means power and the chance to divide scarce space. Moreover, planning laws and regulations reward growth rather than shrinkage. In the Netherlands, for example, municipalities earn a lot from selling building lots, which makes it hard for them to say farewell to the growth paradigm (Wiechmann, 2008; Hospers, 2010).



Figure 4: In some shrinking cities and towns we can find ‘urban farming’ projects (picture: Linda N.).

From local to regional strategies

To cope with shrinkage, a regional view is needed. Shrinking cities are in competition with nearby cities, because housing markets are mainly a regional phenomenon: what one city gains, its neighbours lose. 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 (Holst Laursen, 2008). 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 rather difficult. Local government officials are not inclined to work in the regional interest, since they are accountable to their local constituencies. Local sentiments also often play a role: neighbouring cities or towns 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’ (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). The Germans use the term ‘church tower politics’ for this: in the end, all local authorities take their own community as the starting point for policy action. Rigorous measures from higher levels are needed to counteract this. In the Netherlands, for example, the provincial government can block overambitious investment plans from shrinking areas and thus contribute to local policies that are shrinkage-proof.

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 civil society (the third sector) (Jacobs, 1992; Etzioni, 2001; Reverda, 2011). Each of these sectors has its own tasks and values, but for the proper functioning of society they all need each other. In the context of shrinkage, a gradual shift of power from the government to the market and, particularly, to civil society is likely to take place. 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 – here, it is not so much money, but rather people's intrinsic motivations that make a difference.

Urban Shrinkage and Community Engagement

Since the recent financial and Euro crises, public pleas to empower and engage the local community have been mostly based on cost considerations. From this point of view, citizens have to organise the delivery of public goods and services themselves, simply because government no longer has the budget to do so. This argument ignores the opportunities of community engagement. In urban policy literature, the intrinsic value of citizen participation has been recognised for many years, beginning with the classic article by Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969; Florin and Wandersman, 1990; Maier, 2001). More and more studies across Europe have identified instances of successful community engagement (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2005; Ahrensbach *et al.*, 2011; Metro/Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2012). The call for community engagement in Europe's shrinking cities and towns is of course not new. In the United States, for example, Community Design Centers (CDCs) and Community Development Corporations (CDCs) have played an important part in the restructuring of distressed neighbourhoods and cities (Sanoff, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Other US regions have also begun engaging the local community with the help of non-profit institutions, to cope not only with urban shrinkage, but also with issues like gentrification and minority concentration.

The benefits of community engagement

For shrinking cities and towns, engaging citizens more intensively might be the way forward. First of all, government and citizens have complementary resources which could jointly result in more effective and legitimate strategies (Osner, 2006). Residents have the best knowledge about their daily environment and its deficiencies – after all, they experience it every day. This local knowledge is useful for policymakers who want to implement future-oriented measures. By drawing citizens into the policy process or the delivery of public services, policymakers create greater acceptance for unpopular decisions that follow

from population decline. For instance, if local volunteers have experienced how difficult it is to run a library to which fewer and fewer people come, they are more likely to be accepting when it closes. Citizen participation is intimately linked to people's identification with their community. This 'place attachment' both motivates and strengthens civic engagement. Community engagement can be a 'keep'-factor: residents who are committed to their community are less likely to move out. Finally, the link between participation and social capital – networks between people and the trust and reciprocity to which they lead – works in both directions (Putnam, 2000). Ironically, urban shrinkage often brings citizens together in an attempt to prevent the deterioration of their neighbourhood. 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.

Community engagement in practice

Several forms of citizen participation can be found in European cities and towns. In the context of urban shrinkage, cities and towns in Germany offer a great deal of inspiration (Berlin Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung, 2011; Breukelchen, 2011; Landkreistag NRW, 2012). For example, the municipality of Ludwigshafen has set up more than 50 'social events': groups (students, employees from local firms or members of the Rotary club) volunteer to help for one day in urban restructuring, varying from painting buildings to renovating the local children's farm. Residents in the town of 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 the generations learn from each other. New media, like the internet and mobile phones, are often used to collect and judge the plans that citizens propose. In Solingen – a shrinking and nearly bankrupt town – in 2010 the government asked via the internet which spending cuts residents thought the municipality should implement. For this innovative approach the town received the 'European Public Sector Award 2011'. Interesting cases of community engagement can also be found in the Netherlands. In 2011, a local corporation and a company in Kerkrade-sWest (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 for 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', says the manager of the corporation (Aedes-Magazine, 2011). In Warder, also in the Netherlands, active citizens raised 700 000 euros to save their community centre. Other localities have set up community-owned buses or care systems to contribute to the local quality of life. Obviously, this is community engagement par excellence!

Towards a Clear Division of Tasks

In all the enthusiasm about the potential of community engagement, it is important to remain realistic. In shrinking cities and towns, 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 (Neu, 2011)? 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' (Hooghe, 2001). Another problem is a difference in expectations between government and civil society. Public officials and citizens often speak different languages, reflecting the different worlds in which they live – the daily life of a citizen in a shrinking neighbourhood is a different reality from the system world of a public official behind his desk. In practice, these differences create a lot of confusion, misunderstanding and irritation among citizens who are dependent on the willingness of public authorities to enable the execution of their plans (Termeer *et al*, 2011). Therefore, one might say that community engagement also requires engagement from government officials.

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 civil society? Typically, public officials are somewhat vague about such sensitive issues. It is certainly difficult to say in general what government must guarantee and what citizens could in principle do on their own (Kersten, 2007). 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 town in financial trouble can decide to guarantee citizens in shrinking neighbourhoods working utilities (for example, water and electricity), street lighting, rubbish collection, a broadband internet connection and easy access to health care, education and cultural facilities. Anything above this minimum is something that has to be achieved by local government and citizens together. At the same time, there are also cases (for example, the organisation of a neighbourhood party or the maintenance of the neighbourhood park) where the community itself can be considered to be the only actor. In other words, more clarity is needed about the ownership of problems in shrinking cities and towns and what this ownership means for the division of tasks between the public sector and civil society.

Towards an activating government

Preaching community engagement in shrinking cities and towns is not enough – it must go hand in hand with public measures to enable citizen participation. Or as Neu (2011) 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'. Local governments must be willing to delegate tasks, resources and responsibilities to civil society. For this, a flexible approach towards existing regulation is often necessary. How can local councils expect citizens to become active if the rules work against such engagement? When citizens are taken seriously and empowered in their initiatives, they are also prepared to take responsibility. Shrinking cities and towns should be more flexible 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 best facilitate citizens improving their own quality of life?' In short,

shrinking cities need clarity: citizens have to know where they stand. The so-called CLEAR-approach might be useful in putting this message into practice (Lowndes *et al*, 2006). It can function as a 'checklist' for local governments that want to encourage community engagement in shrinking neighbourhoods. 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 suggests, encouraging community engagement in shrinking cities and towns does not stop once it 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 might be an apt instrument for providing such feedback (Landkreistag NRW, 2012). This can also motivate other stakeholders to join in and engage for the benefit of the community.

Conclusion

Unlike the different causes, the consequences of shrinkage in Europe's cities and towns are quite similar: not only the hardware of a city, but also its software and mindware are likely to deteriorate. This process, in turn, can lead to a downward spiral. What are suitable policy responses for dealing with this? Trying to counteract it with growth and marketing strategies mostly leads to disappointing results. The best strategy for shrinking cities and towns is to accept shrinkage and improve the quality of life for the existing residents.

However, coping with shrinkage is first and foremost an urban governance process. A lot of 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 will be shrinkage-proof and start from a regional

view. Moreover, due to the fiscal burden of urban shrinkage – along with the recent financial and Euro crises – local government will be more and more dependent on the willingness of citizens to give a helping hand. To address urban shrinkage, the participation of citizens is needed, all the more because they have the best local knowledge. In this respect, it is inevitable that at some point citizens will also have to make use of their own resources to improve local quality of life.

Community engagement, however, is not something that can be dictated from the mayor's office or town hall. If public officials want citizens to care for their community, they must enable them to do so. We therefore conclude that community engagement in Europe's shrinking cities and towns requires the engagement of local government as well. In practice, this may imply a more flexible approach from public officials to existing rules and more clarity about the division of tasks between government and the local community.

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