

Population Shrinkage in the Netherlands

From a Cold to a Warm Approach

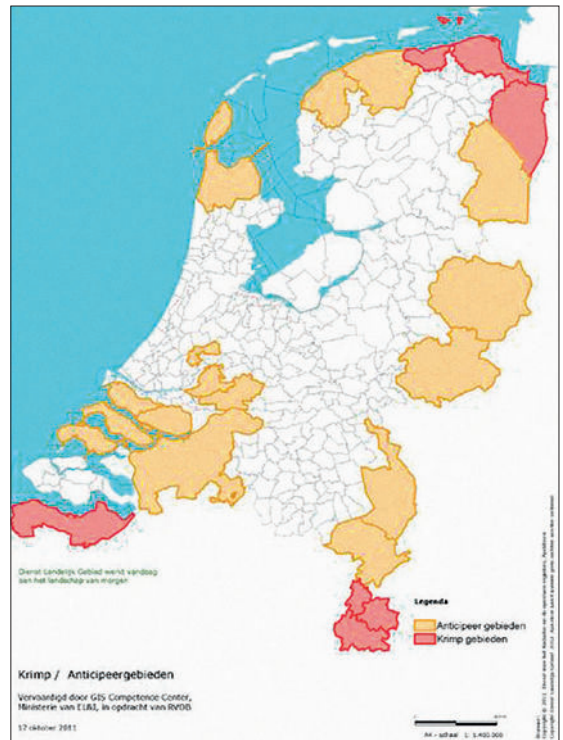
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[GERT-JAN HOSPERS]

Since 2008, the towns of Sluis, Hulst, and Terneuzen have set up shop each year at the annual Emigration Fair under the motto that you really don't have to go abroad to find peace, quiet and elbow room – the Dutch can simply emigrate within their own country. It's one of the measures being taken in Zeelandic Flanders to counter population shrinkage. And it's not only in Zeeland that shrinkage is a top agenda item. Regions such as South Limburg and North Groningen have been losing inhabitants for several years now and have come to be known as 'shrinkage areas'. Other regions such as the Achterhoek, Drenthe, and the Hoekse Waard are regarded by the government as 'anticipation areas': they aren't shrinking yet, but they will in the near future. Ultimately it is expected that half the towns and cities in the Netherlands are going to undergo shrinkage.

This population shrinkage is not difficult to explain. It's all a question of demographics: more and more young people – women in particular – are taking up higher studies and moving from the countryside to the cities. University cities such as Utrecht and Nijmegen have actually become 'women's cities' – they have a surplus of women. Not only is the countryside losing its young people, but it's also losing the children they will eventually bear. This baby drain is going to have a serious impact on education and social activities, inevitably forcing hundreds of village schools in the Netherlands to close their doors in the coming years. In addition, the population of the shrinkage areas is also ageing. On the one hand this is the result of the baby drain (when young people leave the average age goes up), and on the other hand it has to do with increased life expectancy (all of us are living longer).

Shrinkage is posing new problems for regional and municipal governments in the Netherlands. Can shrinkage be stopped, and if so, how? What sort of impact is shrinkage having on local communities? Do we have the means to deal with the growing number of elderly people? New spatial problems are also arising as a result. Sooner or later, the baby drain and ageing are going to lead to fewer inhabitants, causing a surplus of space. A drop in the population is saddling shrinkage areas with unoccupied buildings, not only private homes but also shops, schools, and other facilities. If governing officials fail to act, they must face the threat of a self-sustaining process also known as the Matthew Effect: 'For to him who has will more be given, and he will have



abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away' (Matthew 13:12). In other words: things will go from bad to worse. What can officials do? What works and what doesn't?

Shrinkage areas
(*krimpgebieden*) and
Anticipation areas
(*anticipeergebieden*)

Making the mental switch

For the record: shrinkage is not the next big hype, it's a structural development. According to the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, this is only the beginning. Until 2025, new shrinkage areas throughout the Netherlands will be taking their place alongside Zeeland, South Limburg, and North Groningen. It is expected that the population of Parkstad Limburg (Heerlen, Kerkrade and surroundings) and Northeast Groningen will dwindle by 15% between now and 2040. Zeelandic Flanders and the Achterhoek will probably shrink by 10% and 5% respectively during that period. At the same time, the Randstad (the western conurbation that includes Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) will keep on growing. Demographers predict that traditional growth cities such as Spijkenisse, Vlaardingen, Almere, and Ede will lose inhabitants, however. According to the prognosis, half the municipalities in the country will ultimately be faced with shrinkage, although in the Netherlands this will mainly consist of 'rural shrinkage': 80% of the present and future shrinkage communities are in the countryside.

Naturally these prognoses are also being discussed by local officials. Their reactions are predictable: they either deny shrinkage or they are determined to take action. They are assisted by firms of consultants who apparently see

Strong increase of
the ageing population



the shrinkage theme as an interesting growth market. With headlines such as 'Regional exodus is a grieving process' and 'Shrinkage cannot be averted', journalists stoke the flames even higher. Some mayors and city councillors avoid the word 'shrinkage' and prefer to speak of 'zero growth', 'slimming down', or 'transition'. Others are a bit more advanced in their thinking and talk about 'shrinkage with quality' and 'shrinkage as opportunity'. Local officials continue to regard shrinkage as a sensitive subject, however, because they have so little control over it. Growth gives the government influence and the chance to divide up limited space. In addition, the Dutch national government is known to reward growth. Traditionally, laws and regulations have been tailored to growth, while the salaries of city councillors increase with the size of the municipality. By contrast, shrinkage suggests loss, decline and administrative failure. In such a context, it isn't easy to let go of growth-based thinking. Shrinkage, however, demands a shift in mind-set from regional and local officials. And that doesn't only go for governments. Developers, corporations, organizations, schools, and institutions – not to mention the inhabitants themselves – have to learn how to live with shrinkage.

The cold approach to shrinkage

Many officials think that population shrinkage in their area won't be all that bad. They regularly bring the shrinkage figures up for discussion. It is indeed difficult to predict whether a municipality is going to lose 900 inhabitants over the next fifteen years or only 700, so the cliché 'demography is destiny' only partially applies. Yet demographic prognoses are a bit more reliable than economic projections. That's because there are only three variables involved in shrinkage: birth, death, and moving patterns. And even if the population figures at the local level are not indisputable, at least they serve as a guide for the way ahead.

Areas that are already undergoing shrinkage are more willing to look to the figures as a starting point for policy. One popular anti-shrinkage strategy is city and regional marketing. Many a campaign has been launched in the hope of

attracting new residents and promoting growth, varying from 'Your new future' (Zeelandic Flanders) and 'South Limburg: the bright side of life' to 'Dronten: discover the wide open spaces' and 'Ranch Fryslan' (Kollumerland). Running parallel with these campaigns are the inevitable building projects. Modern housing concepts are especially popular, such as houseboats, fixer-uppers, farm-type houses and houses for horse lovers. The brochure texts are usually the same: here you can realise your dreams at an affordable price, and in a magnificent environment. The Blauwestad – a large home-on-the-water project in East Groningen – is a classic example of this 'cold' approach to shrinkage. The province of Groningen started the project in 2004 to attract highly-educated, wealthy people from the Randstad who were looking for peace and quiet. Other regions also extol the virtues of their housing climate. Marketing Drenthe, for example, organises trial weekends for the whole family, while other regions offer custom-made get-acquainted programmes.

These cold approaches to shrinkage, which are aimed at outsiders, raise certain questions. Ultimately, regions and municipalities are competing for the same group. A successful recruitment campaign in one place draws residents away from another. In addition, the Dutch have a tendency to stick close to home. Two-thirds of the people who move house in the Netherlands do so within their municipality, while only 7% move from one region to another. We see this in the example of the Blauwestad: of the 1,500 parcels available only 190 have been sold, half of them to people from the neighbourhood. When people who want to move start looking beyond their own region, they decide for themselves where they want to go. Marketing can only work as a trigger. If you still want to attract newcomers, focus your attention on local residents, former tourists, and others who have a feel for the area. A relatively large number of 25 to 35-year-olds from South Limburg move back to their native region. If an area is set on attracting such return migrants, then work availability is a crucial factor. In Twente, a 'Career Centre' has been set up to help find suitable jobs for interested 'hunkertukkers' (former inhabitants of Twente who are itching to come home) and their partners.

Warm approach to shrinkage

Fighting shrinkage by attracting newcomers is almost futile. The relevant question for shrinkage regions is not 'how do we attract new inhabitants?' but 'how do we guarantee the quality of life in the region for the people who never left?' That requires 'warm' policy measures that bind the population to the area and involve them in solving the shrinkage problem. In more and more municipalities, local starters in the housing market are being offered starters loans so they can purchase the house of their dreams. The town of Sluis gives free housing advice to its residents and issues loans so they can renovate part of their house or finance a first mortgage. In many shrinkage regions initiatives are also being taken to maintain the level of amenities within small centres or districts. Here housing corporations tend to take the lead. They might purchase the neighbourhood shop or contribute to a multifunctional facility to accommodate a range of services for the elderly (such as a café or home care).

More and more regions and municipalities are reducing their construction plans for new housing. In 2011, the province of Gelderland cut back the number of

planned dwellings in the Achterhoek from 14,000 to 6,000. And more and more local officials are restructuring the existing housing supply. Two examples of warm measures aimed at people who already live in the area are removing the top floor from existing flats and converting row houses to semi-detached homes. In Heerlen, small miners' houses are being combined to form one-family dwellings, while corporations in the Frisian 'Rotten Tooth' project are doing their best to make the 'rotten teeth' (dilapidated buildings that spoil the look of a village) a bit more presentable.

Not all shrinkage communities are interested in searching for new uses for their surplus housing, however. Some deal with the problem of unoccupied buildings by calling in the demolition firm. In the Netherlands, East Groningen and Parkstad Limburg are demolishing buildings on a grand scale. Delfzijl has ordered the demolition of almost 1,600 dwellings and is going to pull down even more in the coming years. Heerlen prefers a different strategy: allowing new construction only if two empty rentals are torn down for every new one that goes up (known as 'un-renting'). Yet it remains to be seen whether the creation of scarcity by demolition is always a good idea. Demolition also costs money (about 45,000 euros per dwelling), and when a building is gone, it's gone. In addition, demolition often meets with resistance among residents, certainly if the municipality doesn't bother to discuss alternatives with them.

In any case, it's always a good idea to involve the local population in problems of shrinkage. Doing so not only creates support for any measures that might be taken, but it also provides surprising insights. For example, researchers recently asked 1,600 residents of the North Groningen countryside how they liked living in a shrinkage area. The result? The villages of North Groningen appear to be alive and kicking despite the shrinkage. Ninety-three percent of the inhabitants even said they were very satisfied living in North Groningen. What makes the region so pleasant to live in is mainly the social cohesion: neighbourhood contacts, a closely-knit community and participation in local activities. It seems that amenities such as shops, schools and sports facilities are not a pre-condition for liveability. Respondents did rank accessibility by car as important. When it comes to amenities and public services, regional accessibility trumps local availability.

Good living without amenities

The Groningen survey is not an isolated case. Research carried out in Overijssel, Zeeland, and Drenthe also indicates that liveability in shrinkage regions does not necessarily depend on services and amenities such as shops, schools, and sports accommodation. Liveability has more to do with the quality of the housing environment and with social factors. Many residents of shrinkage areas do insist that everyday services in the surrounding region be good and safe. All the households in the Groningen hamlet of Niehove have one or more cars. Commuting is a necessity they've learned to live with. When asked about liveability in Niehove, residents said that safety on the country roads left much to be desired. Their priority lists include investment in traffic safety and maintenance of the roadsides and berms – yet this is not something that immediately comes to mind when you think of population shrinkage. So local government



Unoccupied houses as a consequence of shrinkage

officials might ask themselves how residents get around. What groups in the community are less mobile? Can they get a lift with someone else?

Physical accessibility isn't the only important consideration in shrinkage regions. Optimal digital accessibility is also crucial, especially in rural areas. In many remote villages in the Netherlands the internet is still very slow. This is a matter of concern for small creative companies that require a great deal of internet capacity, such as architects, designers, and consultancies. High-speed connections are also needed for new technologies that are responding to the ageing population, such as the 'digital neighbourliness' project in the Achterhoek, which uses a webcam to combat isolation among the elderly in rural areas. 'For most of the outlying area the only internet connection still depends on copper wire,' says the Groningen geographer Strijker. He's calling for the construction of a glass fibre network throughout the Dutch countryside, and for good reason. Fast internet service is the only way to prepare the country's shrinkage regions for home-based work, home automation, and everything that technology still has in store for us.

So the relationship between liveability and the level of amenities and services is more nuanced than many people think. In addition: if there is a particular service that residents think is important, they can contribute themselves to its realisation or maintenance. In more and more shrinkage areas we are seeing examples of 'active citizenship', or to put it another way, the population rolling up their shirtsleeves and pitching in. In Drenthe, for instance, there's a community bus that runs between Beilen and Smilde that is driven by a team of about fifty local volunteers. Go-getters in the town of Warder in Noord-Holland collected 700,000 euros from the local community to save the community centre. And in Elsendorp, Noord-Brabant, residents singlehandedly developed an



Shrinkage areas should be easily accessible



Marketing The Blauwestad
(home-on-the-water project)

alternative system of home care under the motto 'care for and by the people of Elsendorp'. Citizens' initiatives are not the solution for all types of services, of course. The skills required for organising home care are completely different from those needed to fix up a community centre. Shrinkage forces government officials to come up with a clear answer as to what is the responsibility of the government and what can be left to the residents themselves.

Flemings in Zeelandic Flanders?

A growing number of regions and municipalities in the Netherlands are struggling with population shrinkage. Many local government officials are trying to combat shrinkage with new building construction and marketing. But this kind of cold approach makes little sense. People don't move house at the drop of a hat and they decide for themselves where they're going to live. It's more realistic to accept shrinkage and learn to live with it. This calls for a warm approach whose aim is to bind present residents to the region by developing more moderate construction plans, renovating existing houses, and making it more attractive for young locals to purchase a home. Further advice: be cautious when it comes to demolition and involve residents in making the area and its facilities future-proof. If government officials wish to respond to shrinkage, their best bet is to begin with the existing residents. If this approach meets with the approval of outsiders, all well and good – but don't let that be the deciding factor. Whoever would have thought, for example, that more and more Flemings would be moving to Zeelandic Flanders? With house prices in the shrinkage area declining in recent years, it has become attractive for Flemings from the border region to pick up and move to the other side. This trend is now proving far more lucrative for Zeelandic Flanders than all the visits to the Emigration Fair put together. The lesson: when it comes to a long-term process like population shrinkage, patience is a virtue. For government officials, that's a message that can't be repeated too often. ■

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier