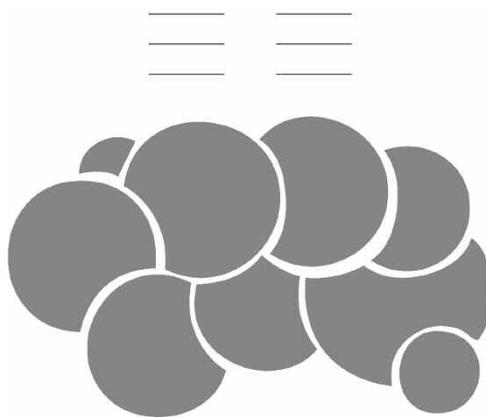


*Who is Afraid of Population Decline?  
The Struggle of Keeping Rural  
Depopulation on the Dutch Agenda*



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**Who is Afraid of Population Decline?  
The Struggle of Keeping Rural Depopulation on the Dutch Agenda**

*Highlights:*

1. Population decline is not necessarily or exclusively a rural issue, and both growth and decline may occur in close proximity.
2. Population size matters, but the shifting composition of the population may be a matter of more concern.
3. Regional depopulation is not 'born from within' but promoted by the reorientation of national development plans and investments towards urban growth.
4. Depopulation is not accepted by the policymakers as a natural or inevitable consequence of modernisation.
5. Regional policies should confront depopulation limiting the traditional prioritisation to urban development.

*Abstract:* The Netherlands is a small, highly urbanised and densely populated country. The distances are short and levels of welfare high. Throughout the 80s and 90s, people were generally satisfied with service levels in rural areas and experienced the rural areas' quality of life as high. Around 2006, however, the population started to decline in several rural regions. The government responded with the development of two national Action Plans for Population Decline. This paper analyses the national action plans, their content and implementation. It looks into the problem definition and assignment of responsibility, their success in addressing population decline problems, and in keeping depopulation on the political agenda. The paper concludes with some reflections on what we can learn about population decline and related policies based on the experiences in a highly urbanised country like the Netherlands.

*Keywords:* Depopulation, centralisation, periphery, services, quality of life.

**¿Quién teme el descenso de la población?  
La lucha por mantener la despoblación rural en la agenda holandesa**

*Ideas clave:*

1. El declive de la población no es necesariamente o exclusivamente un problema rural, y tanto el crecimiento como el declive pueden darse en estrecha proximidad.
2. El tamaño de la población es importante, pero la composición cambiante de la población puede ser más preocupante.
3. La despoblación regional no "nace del interior", sino que es promovida por la reorientación de los planes de desarrollo nacional y las inversiones hacia el crecimiento urbano.
4. Los responsables políticos no aceptan la despoblación como una consecuencia natural o inevitable de la modernización.

5. Las políticas regionales deben afrontar la despoblación limitando la tradicional priorización del desarrollo urbano.

*Resumen:* Los Países Bajos son un país pequeño, muy urbanizado y densamente poblado. Las distancias son cortas y los niveles de bienestar elevados. A lo largo de los años 80 y 90, la población estaba generalmente satisfecha con los niveles de servicio en las zonas rurales y consideraba que la calidad de vida de éstas era alta. Sin embargo, en torno a 2006, la población empezó a disminuir en varias regiones rurales. El gobierno respondió con el desarrollo de dos Planes de Acción nacionales para el Descenso de la Población. En este artículo se analizan tales planes de acción, su contenido y su aplicación. Se examina la definición del problema y la asignación de responsabilidades, su éxito a la hora de abordar los problemas de descenso de la población y de mantener la despoblación en la agenda política. El artículo concluye con algunas reflexiones sobre lo que podemos aprender sobre el declive de la población y las políticas que se relacionan más directamente con este, a partir de las experiencias en un país altamente urbanizado como los Países Bajos.

*Palabras clave:* Despoblación, centralización, periferia, servicios, calidad de vida.

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## 1. Introduction

Population decline is a common problem of rural regions in many parts of the world. In particular, in the peripheral areas, depopulation undermines the regional economy through the shortages in labour and consumer demand and shatters the basis under the maintenance of public and private services. The decline of population and the outmigration of young and educated residents is a wellknown problem of the remotely located and inaccessible regions. Yet, even in a densely populated country like the Netherlands, some rural regions struggle with a declining and ageing population.

Noguera *et al.* (2017) indicate such areas as 'inner peripheries'. They bring to the fore that the location of 'peripheries' is not necessarily geographically remote but includes regions that can be at the very heart of a country. The Italian term of 'inner areas' reflects a similar idea (Barca *et al.*, 2014). 'Inner peripheries' do include relatively remote areas, often along the national borders, but their 'peripherality' results from multiple processes in which demographic transitions interact with socioeconomic and political dynamics (Kühn, 2015). Nevertheless, depopulation is often presented as proof of a region's backwardness and inability to keep up with modern life's speed and dynamic. The 'rural exodus' is then seen as part and parcel of modernisation, in which the city appears as the natural winner. Such a view overlooks not only the enormous differentiation of rural areas, some of which are flourishing; it also ignores the occurrence of depopulation in urban areas (Leeuwen, 2019; Hoekveld, 2014). It does

acknowledge, however, the interrelation of population growth and decline. If growth and decline are interrelated, it makes little sense to seek causes within the depopulating regions. Depopulation is, after all, a symptom of changing spatial relations. To understand its cause we need to investigate what has weakened respectively strengthened a regions' socioeconomic status and attractiveness (Bock, 2018, 2020).

The Netherlands is one of the countries where most would probably not expect depopulation to pose a problem. It is, after all, a small and densely populated country, without any eye-catching peripheries. And indeed, currently, not population loss but population growth is dominating the public debate. Both are, however, taking place at the same time and are closely related. Population growth is concentrated in the major cities and the metropolitan regions in the West of the country and caused by international and internal migration, contributing to depopulation in the more peripheral areas, particularly along the national borders.

There is a well-known history of the 'rural exodus' related to the industrialisation of the Netherlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and again following agricultural modernisation after WWII. It then quietly vanished from the political agenda, to reappear unexpectedly in 2006 with the publication of the Dutch report "Structurele Bevolkingsdaling" (structural population decline) by Derks *et al.* (2006), which predicted both population and household decline for many regions in the Netherlands in the (near) future. Although its urgency remains contested, the call for attention resulted in two National Action Plans for Population Decline, popularly referred to as 'shrinkage action plans', in force until 2020. This paper focuses on these two national action plans, studies their framing of the problem and identification of responsibilities, while considering how this has changed in response to political and socioeconomic dynamics. It uses recent studies into developing (rural) regions experiencing population decline and analyses policy documents and policy evaluations.

The paper is structured as follows. It starts with a brief introduction of the Dutch context of population decline and discusses the two National Action Plans and their results. It then reflects on the continued political engagement at the national level in the light of the changing political and socioeconomic context. The paper concludes with some reflections on what can be learned from rural depopulation policies in a highly urbanised country like the Netherlands.

## 2. *Population decline in the Netherlands*

The Netherlands is one of the smallest European member states with 41.540 square kilometres (Eurostat<sup>1</sup>) and about 17.4 million inhabitants. It is densely populated with 517 persons per square kilometres<sup>2</sup> and among the wealthiest EU countries with a GDP of 130/per capita. However, the income differences within the country are extensive, with the regional gross domestic product ranging from 88 in the North East (Drenthe) to 170 in the North West (Noord Holland). Similar differences can be seen in population growth. In total, the population is still increasing, although only due to immigration, as birth rates are below replacement level (CBS, 2020). The rate of population growth is, moreover, unequally distributed across the country. Whereas the population is growing in urban areas, particularly in the West of the country, rural regions in the North, East and South are facing population decline<sup>3</sup>.

Rural depopulation is not a new phenomenon in the Netherlands. Rural residents left for the city before – in times of industrialisation when the factories offered new jobs to farm labourers, and again in the 1950s when the modernisation of agriculture further reduced the need for farm labour (Melis, 2013). Also, the youth has been searching for higher education and adventurous city life for many decades. But since the 1970s, a substantially higher share of youth is opting for higher education while the birth rates are rapidly decreasing in rural areas. Throughout the 1960s and early 70s, the Dutch government counteracted population decline by stimulating the industrialisation of agricultural regions and restructuring industries where mines or textile industries closed. In both cases, a Keynesian development policy was followed, with investments in material infrastructures and subsidies for the establishment of businesses and industries (Hoogeboom, 2020; Bock, 2020). During the economic crisis in the 1970s, the belief in state support crumbled, and with it, state investment in rural areas. Rural areas were increasingly considered as places for consumption rather than production (Marsden, 1999), meant for residents who enjoy the peace and quiet,

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- 1• Retrieved from: [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/figures/living\\_en#size](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/figures/living_en#size) (21/12/2020)
  - 2• Retrieved from: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/37296ned?q=bevolkingsdichtheid> (21/12/2020)
  - 3• Retrieved from: <https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/70072ned/table?searchKeywords=bevolkingsgroei> (21/12/2020)

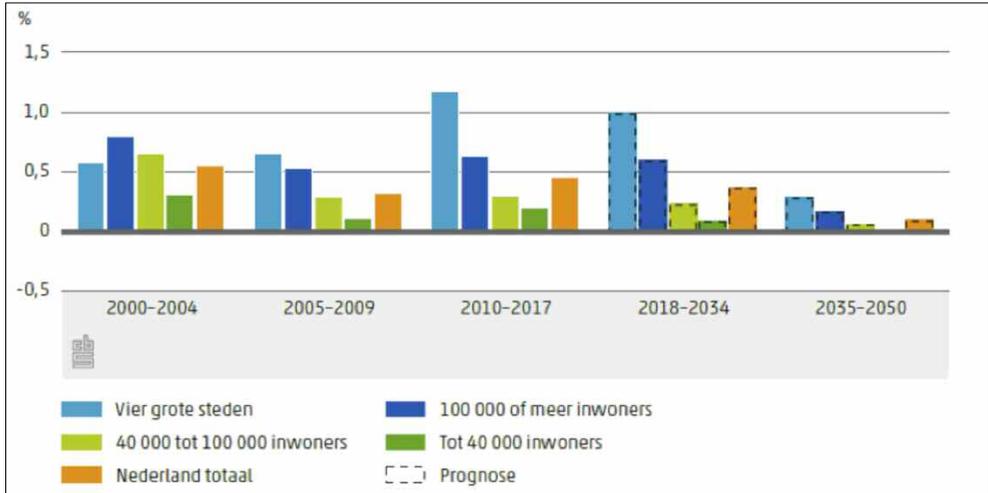
happy to commute for work and higher education in nearby cities. And indeed, certainly around the bigger cities, rural areas witnessed an increase of residents as part of a more general trend of suburbanisation and counterurbanisation. With that, the problem of rural depopulation was believed to be solved.

But then, in 2006, rural depopulation reappeared on the political agenda with the publication of the report on structural population decline by Derks *et al.* (2006) and Hospers & Reverda (2014). Or more precisely, it was 'regional depopulation' that they appointed, as the concern regards the decline of population in the peripheral regions, most of which are located along the Dutch borders. The depopulation prognosis was not new for Dutch demographers. Still, the Derks report had a strong agenda-setting influence in Dutch policymaking (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2009).

In the Netherlands, regional population decline is both recognised and contested – in existence, problem definition and urgency to act. Statistics demonstrate that the population is declining in some regions and forecasts underline that this will most likely continue to be the case and expand to more regions. Nevertheless, there is growing resistance to identify with 'shrinkage' at the local level. On the one hand, that has to do with the fine-grained character of population decline. Although there are regions where the population is overall decreasing, both growth and decline may occur in close proximity. There is also fear that a 'shrinkage label' will stigmatise the region and produce population decline as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, the gravity of the factual and predicted population decline differs considerably in time and place, even among shrinking areas. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between temporary fluctuations in population numbers and long term trends. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, for instance, many rural areas expect the arrival of urbanites who, with the trend towards homework, seek refuge in the countryside's spaciousness. Whereas it is yet unclear if COVID-19 will indeed substantially increase the rural population, it is evident that the difficulty to find affordable housing in the major cities does encourage urban residents to move to smaller places in the cities' vicinity (CBS, 2021).

Figure 1 below (Riele *et al.*, 2019, p. 8) reflects both the real population dynamics since 2000 and the most recent forecast until 2050. It points to population growth concentration in the four biggest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – situated in the so-called Randstad in the West of the Netherlands). It also shows that population size matters for the chance of cities and towns to maintain some growth. Moreover, the prognoses reveals a likely future with considerably smaller growth, even in the bigger cities.

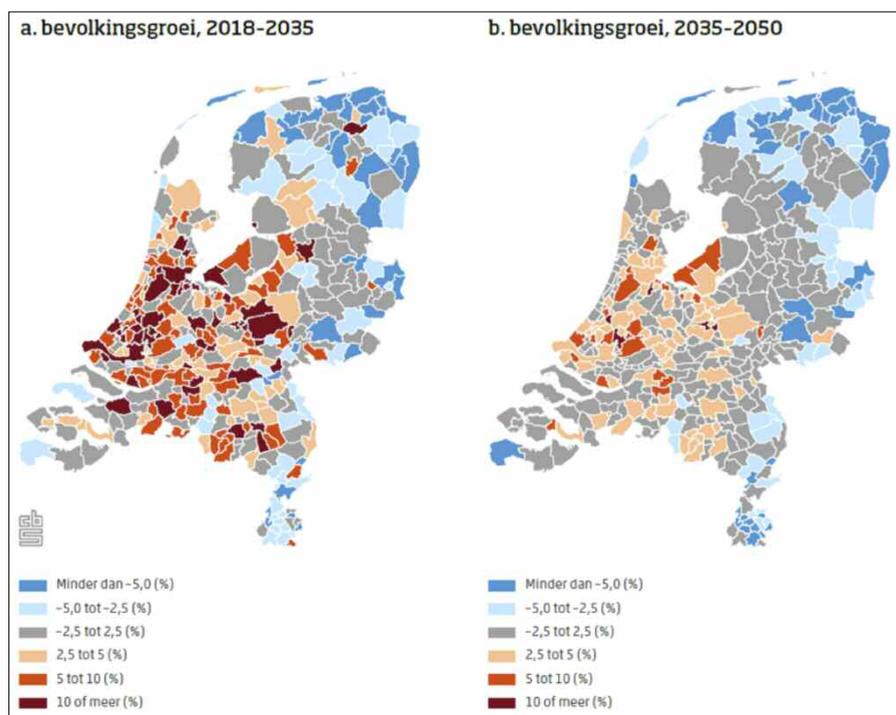
Figure 1:  
Annual population growth by size of the municipality



Note: Light blue – four major cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht), dark blue 100.000 residents or more, light green 40.000-100.000 residents, dark green up to 40.000 residents, orange Netherlands as a whole, interrupted lines (---) prognosis.

Taking a closer look at demographic prognosis (see figure 2) (Riele *et al.*, 2019, p. 6) at the local level demonstrates the variety in population dynamics and proximity of higher and lower levels of growth and decline. Again, however, the forecast clearly appoints continuous depopulation along the Dutch periphery, with some of the current shrinkage areas recovering and some new areas entering the phase of population decline.

Figure 2:  
population growth by municipality: a. 2018-2035, b. 2035-2050



Note: Dark blue: less than -5.0 %, light blue: -5.0 to -2.5 %, grey -2.5 to +2.5 %, light orange : +2.5-+5.0 %, light red: +5.0-+10.0 %, dark red: +10 % or more.

Most of the current and future 'shrinkage areas' are 'not urban' or 'hardly urban' in the Dutch definition of the word<sup>4</sup>, even though almost the whole country is urbanised following OECD standards<sup>5</sup>. It includes old industrial towns, such as Heerlen in Parkstad

- 4• Less than 500 addresses (not urban) or 500-1000 addresses (hardly urban) per square kilometre. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2019/44/meeste-afval-per-inwoner-in-minst-stedelijke-gemeenten/stedelijkheid> (21/12/2020). See also Haartsen & Venhorst (2010).
- 5• The OECD defines rural areas according to population density (below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre), percentage of the population living in an area (predominantly rural if 50 % of the population of that regions lives in a rural community), and the size of a nearby city (< 200.000) (OECD, 2016).

Limburg in the South East or Stadskanaal in East Groningen in the North East. It is, therefore, essential to look more closely into the significance of peripherality and rurality in the Dutch context. Here, distances are small, and most regions are relatively well connected in terms of mobility infrastructures compared to other countries, and even depopulating rural areas are more densely populated than elsewhere in Europe.

In sum, we may, hence, conclude that the Netherlands represents a particular case in Europe where population decline is a rather new phenomenon and relatively small in size compared to other countries. There are also similarities; even in a country where distances are short, it is mainly the peripheral regions that lose inhabitants, whereas the population is growing in the metropolitan core.

### *3. Cutch shrinkage policy: two national action plans for population decline*

So far, the Netherlands has implemented two National Action Plans for Population Decline, both of which will be presented and discussed below. It is around this paper's likely date of publication that we will know if a third action plan will see the light. This will, among others, depend on the evaluation of the second action plan, which is due in Spring 2021. While we cannot wait for its results, we will provide some insights into the questions and debates that arise around the future of Dutch shrinkage politics.

Dutch national shrinkage policy started with the first intergovernmental Action Plan for Population Decline, running from 2009–2015 (Min BZK, 2009). It was developed and implemented by the Ministry of the Interior (and Kingdom Relations), which coordinated actions across all central ministries and consultative bodies at the provincial and municipal level<sup>6</sup>.

The Ministry of the Interior was designated as a responsible ministry and coordinated the engagement across all interested ministries: the Ministry of Agriculture,

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<sup>6</sup> The organisation for Interprovincial consultation (IPO) and Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG).

Nature & Food, the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry of Infrastructure & Environment, the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, the Ministry of Public Health, Wellbeing & Sports, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The first action plan identified seven shrinking areas and sixteen so-called anticipation regions based on the current and forecasted decline in population and households during 2010-2020, respectively 2020-2040<sup>7</sup>. The action plan called upon national, regional, and local policymakers to raise awareness of the problem and train policymakers and other stakeholders to prepare for the changing situation. Vacant housing, unemployment and disappearing public services were considered as the main problems, threatening the quality of life in shrinking areas. The latter was described in terms of 'liveability'. In the Dutch context, liveability reflects the satisfaction with the living environment, for example, transport and job possibilities, services, neighbourhood and housing, and social cohesion (Gieling & Haartsen, 2017). The action plan offered some funding to finance training and experimental (civic) initiatives invested in maintaining services. Besides, municipalities in the shrinking regions with more than 1 % population decline in the preceding seven years received a so-called shrinkage allowance<sup>8</sup>. This allowance should compensate for the loss of funding that municipalities receive based on resident numbers. Higher losses of the population (above the threshold of 1 %) gave the right to higher shrinkage allowances. The allowance was granted between 2010-2015, with the allowance's right and its size recalculated annually (Steiner *et al.*, 2015).

The first action plan aimed to put population decline on the agenda and raise awareness of its importance. It communicated to local and regional policymakers the following general message: *Don't fight population decline but invest in maintaining the liveability for the residents who stay* (Min BZK, 2020). In doing so, the government wished to discourage further local housing projects, which local governments considered essential to attract new residents and expand their tax base, yet which were expected to add to more vacant housing in the long run and more competition between localities. At the same time, this message communicated the government's belief that population decline was a natural and unavoidable phenomenon in times of urbanisation. Something shrinking regions should no longer fight but accept and learn to live with.

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7• In 2009 the so-called shrinking areas had to experience already a substantial and structural decline of both population and households. In the so-called 'anticipation areas' shrinkage of the population and/or households was to be expected in 2010-2020 and/or 2020-2040.

8• In Dutch: krimp toeslag.

The first shrinkage action plan was evaluated in 2014 (Krikke *et al.*, 2014), pointing at flaws in the governance structure and gaps in the definition of the problem. The assessors indicated that the state should accept more responsibility as the central government while at the same time give more room to the regional/provincial government to lead. Underlining the context specificity of population decline and its consequences, the regional government was expected to be more apt to develop territorial plans with tailor-made solutions. The evaluation committee asked for attention to several issues that were not or insufficiently addressed in the first action plan, such as the importance of mobility and (digital) connectivity. Whereas digital services were expected to fill the gap of vanishing local services, many peripheral regions struggled with the lack of high-speed internet connections (Salemink *et al.*, 2016). They also pointed at the need to invest in the regional economy and to reinforce border-crossing collaborations with Germany and Belgium. More generally, the evaluation committee concluded that shrinking areas were often confronted with an accumulation of problems, which were challenging to deal due to their interrelatedness. Some of the problems were also caused by the unintended and unforeseen effects of generic national policies, developed under the assumption of continuous growth. Municipality funding by the central government depends, for instance, on population numbers. Fewer residents, hence, means less funding, even though costs do not decrease conformingly.

Dutch municipalities have hardly any tax income of their own, besides for real estate. They used to generate extra financial means by way of housing projects – which explains why municipalities are so keen to build houses even in times of population decline (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). Other generic national measures with unforeseen harsh consequences for rural areas include the following: measures meant to streamline public transport, which resulted in the closure of bus lines rendering places less accessible; policies that restructured school funding which made it more difficult for smaller schools to make ends meet; policies that affected the financing of local hospitals and housing corporations, which made it more difficult for smaller hospitals to make ends meet and which prevented housing corporations to financially contribute to social initiatives. Common to all these examples is that the specific situation of shrinking regions was not taken into account when the national policies were developed and implemented. Without being aware of it, they only served and fitted the metropolitan context, taking population growth as their point of departure (Krikke *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the assessors of the first shrinkage action plan strongly advised the government to develop more tailor-made actions plans to account for the specific needs in each of the rather diverse shrinkage regions.

The second National Action Plan for Population Decline was implemented in 2016, addressing the situation in nine shrinking and ten (later eleven) anticipation regions<sup>9</sup>. While including a common core, the second action plan was built around regional partnerships between the provincial and national governments, with some variation in policy goals and measures. It took account of some of the issues identified in the evaluation of the first action plan. This is also reflected in the definition of problems; next to vacant housing and real estate and maintenance of services, more attention was paid to economic vitality and labour market and the importance of (digital) connectivity. Additional funding was available for shrinking regions, now rephrased as 'decentralisation allowance', referring to the decentralisation of public tasks towards the regional level. In addition, the Ministry of Interiors called upon the designated shrinking regions to use these funds to strengthen their mutual collaboration in addressing shared problems and attracting additional funds. It was the biggest municipalities in the formal shrinking regions, which received additional funds for five years (Dantzig *et al.*, 2020).

The second action plan included some new messages, such as the need to invest in smart specialisation, fitting the region's identity, and the importance of private-public collaboration at the provincial level. For the latter, a new tool was developed and implemented in 2018, the so-called Region Deal. The Region-Deal is meant to function as a catalysator for regional development across the country, and hence not only in the shrinking regions. The central government earmarked 960 million euro for these region deals, of which 200 million are reserved for the shrinking regions. Regional governments were called upon to organise partnerships with businesses, knowledge institutions and third sector organisations for joint investments around commonly defined priorities that fit the local context and its identity (e.g. education, tourism, sustainable energy, nature inclusive agriculture, marine economy). The partnerships were invited to submit plans for investments to the national government, which provided additional (co-)investments once the plans were approved.

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9• In 2014 the definition of shrinking and anticipating areas departed from a more precise level of (current/anticipated) decline of the population and/households. Regions in which the population was expected to decrease with at least 12.5 % from 2009-2040 and household numbers by 5 % were identified as 'shrinking regions'. In 'anticipation regions' the population was expected to decrease by at least 2.5 % until 2040. This resulted in a slightly different number of nine shrinking and ten anticipation regions in the second action plan, implemented in 2016.

The implementation of the region-deal marks the national government's renewed attention for the development of regions, also outside the metropolitan areas. It accompanies a growing awareness of the costs of the rising disparity within the country as well as a greater sense of the vital contribution regions will need to deliver when addressing the significant challenges such as sustainable energy production, climate change mitigation and housing (Bock, 2019).

The second national shrinkage action plan remained in force until the end of 2020. Its evaluation is currently commissioned. It is, however, possible to gain some insight into its effectiveness through progress reports produced internally in 2017 and 2018, a third progress report delivered by a consultancy firm in 2019 (Birch consultants, 2019) as well as an evaluation of the additional decentralisation funds published in December 2020 (Dantzig *et al.*, 2020). All four reports indicate that the shrinking regions are still struggling with the same problems around vacant housing, closure of public and private services, lack of connectivity and economic vitality threatening the shrinking region's liveability (Min BZK, 2018). There are differences between municipalities in the sense of urgency felt and the readiness to act, reflecting the stigmatisation that some of the shrinking municipalities feel (Min BZK, 2017). Overall, the provincial government and housing corporations are seen as the main actors investing in shrinking regions' quality of life (Birch consultants, 2019).

The hopes are high regarding the opportunities that the region deals may offer (Birch consultants, 2019). Simultaneously, the national government is called upon to take a more active role and reconsider its current position as facilitator (*ibid*). The ministry itself indicated in the report of 2018 (Min BZK, 2018) that the intensity of the ministry's engagement in a region was defined by that region's ambition, as a result of which collaboration mainly took place in a so-called "coalition of the willing". More generally, the progress reports indicate the need for intersectoral collaboration, such as between education and labour markets, interregional collaboration between shrinking regions and intergovernmental collaboration between national, regional and local governments. There is also a call for more collaboration between the ministries, including the ministries responsible for education, health, agriculture, and economy. They all deal with important issues for shrinking regions (e.g. closure of schools or hospitals), but do not have an explicit shrinking policy of their own. The third progress report (Birch consultants, 2019) stresses again the importance to prevent the unintended effects of generic policies and identifies 'proofing' as a useful instrument. In addition, the government should restrict regulations that hamper the development of innovative solutions. Last but not least, the progress report calls for more attention

given to the so-called anticipation regions which struggle to cope with similar problems as the shrinking regions without having access to additional funds.

#### 4. *National shrinkage policy in a changing socioeconomic and political context*

An analysis of Dutch 'shrinkage policies' is not complete without discussing the changing political context in the Netherlands, in which the subsequent actions plans were developed and implemented. The Netherlands has a strong tradition of regional planning, described by Haartsen and Venhorst (2010, p. 219) as "the almost irrepressible urge to organise, plan, and guide all developments that (may) have consequences for the organisation of space". Top-down, exogenous investments in rural and regional development already diminished in the late 1970s and 1980s to be replaced by policies supporting endogenous bottom-up development. At the same time, the focus shifted from economy and employment towards liveability and quality of residence (Bock, 2020; Hoogeboom, 2020), analogous to the idea of the countryside as a place of consumption instead of production (Marsden, 1999). The belief in central spatial planning crumbled in the late 1990s as well and was replaced by decentralised planning.

The so-called 'urban agenda' (Agenda Stad) concentrated economic investments in the so-called top sectors and the metropolitan areas. It stimulated high level employment in the major cities and with it immigration into the Randstad, the Dutch metropolis. This, unintendedly, contributed to population decline 'in the periphery' (Bock, 2018).

It is the peripheral areas that are hit hardest by the austerity measures taken to cope with the global financial crisis in 2007-2009. They have difficulty to recover in terms of employment while carrying the burden of the decentralisation of responsibilities in the social domain. Population decline resulted in an imbalanced composition of the population in terms of age, education, and socioeconomic status. More and more people depend on services while the municipalities have difficulty maintaining them (Kromhout *et al.*, 2020). Several municipalities voiced their concern and disappointment in the state, which culminated in explicit protest when the national government announced to proceed with a reorganisation of municipal payments that will result in significant cuts in the financing of smaller peripheral municipalities (P10, 2020).

In many peripheral areas, citizens have developed initiatives to maintain services with voluntary engagement (Ubels *et al.*, 2019). Those initiatives are highly appreciated and welcomed as part of the turn towards the so-called participation society, in which citizens help each other instead of relying on the state (Vermeij & Gieling, 2016). Research confirms the interest of citizens to engage on behalf of their local communities yet also reveals critical flaws regarding the success, sustainability and selectivity of such initiatives. Initiatives are often taken place in the more resourceful places, initiated by experienced and well-connected citizens. They need a lot of patience and perseverance as well to receive the support of local governments and formal institutions; this threatens the sustainability of initiatives in the longer run (Meerstra-de Haan *et al.*, 2020; Ubels *et al.*, 2019; Salemink *et al.*, 2017).

It is difficult to say if, when and why national policymakers regained interest in the regions. The implementation of region deals in 2018 may be interpreted as the first step towards central investment in the regions. Here, political unrest has probably played a role (Groot, 2019) but also growing awareness that challenges such as the energy transition cannot be met without the regions. In the prospect of national elections in March 2021, there are more voices calling out for a return towards central planning, openly criticising the new method for coordinated decentralised planning, the National Strategy for Spatial Planning (NOVI), which has not even been fully rolled out. It is yet to be seen how the new government will take up the challenge to combine regional development and national spatial planning.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Population decline threatens the future of many rural areas in Europe and beyond. It is often perceived as inevitable in a time of accelerating urbanisation, almost a force of nature threatening those areas that are unable to cope with the advancement of the global economy and network society. As always, the reality is far more complex. Areas experiencing population decline are not necessarily rural nor remote. There are formerly thriving urban areas among them, and some remotely located rural areas are popular places of (return)migration among those feeling the urban 'rat race'.

This paper discusses the dynamics of (rural) population decline in the Netherlands. At first glance, a surprising case of population decline given the fact that it concerns a small country with a high population density and short distances, which is often presented as one big city. After briefly presenting the results of our analysis of the Dutch situation, we will now reflect on the insights it generates for population decline more in general.

In the Netherlands, rural depopulation was thought to be overcome in the 1970s and 80s but it re-entered the political agenda in 2006. Most regions confronted with depopulation are located along the border of the country; there are mainly rural but include regional towns and relatively urbanised areas, offering employment in a variety of sectors, including industries and the public domain. The global financial crisis, austerity measures and public budget cuts hit those regions hard. Also, COVID-19 has severe effects on employment and the average income of citizens as well as municipalities.

The national government implemented two National Action Plans for Population Decline. Both plans departed from the idea that depopulation needed to be accepted, not combatted, and that policies should mitigate its effects to maintain the quality of life among the remaining citizens. Development should, moreover, result from within the regions, organised through local and regional policies. The national government should play a facilitating role, assisting the regions with knowledge and advice and some funding, mainly for experiments. The Dutch government did not invest in the maintenance of regional services herself and did not consider to support public employment, for instance, through the resettlement of public institutions.

Both national action plans communicate the idea that depopulation is a regional problem caused by regional development and, hence, to be addressed by regional actors. The national government was ready to assist the 'needy' regions but did not consider it a matter of national concern or responsibility of the central government. In recent years, this attitude seems to shift. There is more interest in regional development and also more readiness for central investments. Both, increasing spatial inequality and political unrest and raising awareness of a national interest in regional space, probably contribute to this change in attitude. On the eve of national elections, March 17 2021, it remains to be seen if and how the national government will engage with regional development.

We started this discussion underlining the particularity of the Dutch case, and one might wonder what can be learned from such a particular case. Yet, it is just this particularity that provides some interesting insights.

Firstly, the Dutch case demonstrates that population decline is not necessarily or exclusively a rural issue. It may include areas with a relatively high population density, a diverse economy that is not dominated by primary production, and not geographically remote. The Dutch depopulating regions are relatively peripheral at best but certainly not inaccessible.

Secondly, depopulation is about much more than decreasing numbers. Population size matters, but the shifting composition of the population may be a matter of more concern as it relates to the community's ability to cope and, hence, a region's social resilience. Age matters, but also education, income, and health. All these factors matter for a community's readiness to negotiate with the local government and its capability to develop civic initiatives that may replace disappearing services.

Thirdly, population decline took off again in the Netherland when the political and socioeconomic context changed. When investments were centralised in an urban agenda of economic growth and 'liveability' was framed as a regional responsibility. In the course of the financial crisis, public budgets were cut, and social services were judged on their cost-efficiency. Hence, regional depopulation is not 'born from within' but promoted by the reorientation of national development plans and investments towards urban growth.

Fourthly, Dutch policymakers' resurgent interest to invest in 'peripheral' regions underlines the fact that they do not accept depopulation to be not a natural or inevitable consequence of modernisation. It reflects the changing (dis)interest in particular regions' importance and readiness to invest in equal living conditions.

Ultimately the Dutch case underlines that rural depopulation is not a rural problem or responsibility. It is part and parcel of national policies and needs to be addressed in this way as well. Regional policies cannot confront depopulation as long as it is fuelled by national policies prioritising urban development. Hopefully, COVID-19 taught us a lesson by underlining the city's vulnerability and the rural regions' importance for a good and healthy life.

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## *Authors' contribution*

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Conceptualization	60 %	40 %
Data curation	30 %	70 %
Formal analysis	40 %	60 %
Funding acquisition	0 %	0 %
Investigation	60 %	40 %
Methodology	50 %	50 %
Project administration	90 %	10 %
Resources	0 %	0 %
Software	0 %	0 %
Supervision	0 %	
Validation	80 %	20 %
Visualization	20 %	80 %
Writing – original draft	70 %	30 %
Writing – review & editing	60 %	40 %

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