

III. How the Dutch Deal with Demographic Decline

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For the past few years, there has been much attention paid to demographic decline in the Netherlands. Initially, the shrinkage of an area's population was considered as a marginal phenomenon in the peripheral regions, such as Limburg, Groningen and Zeeland. However, now, it is recognized as an omnipresent phenomenon. According to the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, up to 2030 a quarter of the Dutch municipalities will experience a population decline of more than 2.5% (PBL 2014). Furthermore, this decline will not remain limited to areas

by Van der Laan, the then Minister of Integration and Housing, to the shrinking old industrial town of Heerlen, demographic decline became part of the political agenda. Ganzedijk and Heerlen were made much of in the press and provoked a societal discussion: how should we deal with population shrinkage? Journalists, researchers, consultants and policymakers ran with the theme. Meanwhile, demographic decline is an integral part of the policy discourse in the Netherlands. In this article, we will review the phenomenon and explore how the Dutch deal with it.



Fig. 4: Thanks to the hamlet of Ganzedijk in Groningen the Dutch became acquainted with shrinkage in their own country; photographer: Marcel Oosterwijk, 2012, Wikimedia Commons

on the edges of the Netherlands. For example, villages within the Randstad conurbation are already having to deal with that now. There is also a demographic decline in the large cities such as Rotterdam and Almere. Here, we usually see that one district is growing at the expense of another.

Whether we are talking about a region, city, village or district – the threat of demographic decline is and will remain the 'ghost town'. Dutch people are familiar with images from the media of empty districts in Detroit, Liverpool or East Germany. In 2008, TV viewers across the Netherlands became acquainted with shrinkage in their own country, in the hamlet of Ganzedijk. This small village in Groningen had been nominated for demolition, with all the ensuing social disquiet. In 2009, after a visit

1 Demographic decline as a policy problem

There are still a few policymakers in Dutch municipalities who play down the demographic decline. Their usual reaction is that the data on population trends are incorrect or that the consequences won't be all that bad. Demographic predictions for the long term supposedly have a considerable error margin, they claim. Furthermore, the administrators often say that it is not the demographic decline but the economic decline of an area that should be the main point of concern.

If we narrow down decline to a quantitative phenomenon of decreasing population figures, then it is indeed possible to put it in some perspective. After all, the reality of population trends can always turn out differently to the forecast, certainly at the local level. This does not take away

the fact that the qualitative characteristics of demographic decline are problematic. 'Brain drain' occurs: due to the economic possibilities, young people and more highly educated people move to the large cities, in particular to the Randstad. As a result of this, the population structure changes in the regions that these people leave. The inhabitants who remain behind are generally the elderly and people with a low education, with their own story behind the figures. They see facilities disappear – for them, putting demographic forecasts into perspective does not work.

In order to understand the phenomenon of demographic decline, we must make a distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' shrinkage (Hospers & Reverda 2015). The hard aspects of shrinkage refer to the physical, visible consequences of demographic decline, such as unsold building plots, boarded-up houses, empty shops and the impoverishment of neighbourhoods. The soft aspects of shrinkage refer to the changing social structure which occurs due to demographic decline. Examples are young people and more highly educated people moving elsewhere and the consequences of this, such as associations that have to deal with a loss of members, ailing social-cultural facilities or schools that are forced to close. Usually, the soft aspects form the greatest societal problems of demographic decline. An unsold plot only affects the owner of the plot, but if a school has to close due to a lack of pupils, the whole community feels the consequences of this. In practice, both types of decline are of course closely connected. For example, water supply companies in the region of South Limburg not only have to deal with hard decline (problems which arise from the under-utilization of the pipe network), but also with soft decline (poorer water quality because, due to the aging population and the related increase in use of medicines, more harmful substances end up in the water).

Gradually, administrators in the Netherlands are realizing that growth is no longer an obvious matter. They realize that differences occur in the demand for land, houses, buildings and facilities. At the moment, the Randstad is growing and following on from this a few cities that appear to emerge from this like fingers from a palm of the hand: Amersfoort, Zwolle, Arnhem and Eindhoven (this is why it is sometimes referred to as the 'Handstad'). Many places in the rest of the country have to deal with population

decline, especially areas which border with Germany and Belgium. This development is of a structural nature and requires a completely different attitude from politicians, planners, urban developers and real estate developers. This is not easy for professional groups who have been used to thinking in terms of growth since the end of World War II. Now that the economy is slowly recovering, it will appear that the demand for space is increasing in some places, but is lacking in other places. In our thoughts and actions, growth and decline will have to exist alongside each other.

2 Demographic decline and other transitions

Everywhere in the Netherlands, demographic decline goes hand in hand with transitions of a different nature, which have partly the same effects. For instance, the demand for office space in cities and towns is decreasing, not just because of the economic crisis, but also because of people working from home or working flexible hours. In addition,



Fig. 5: The Eye Film Institute in Amsterdam-Noord is a tourist magnet, but it should also generate positive effects for the surrounding district; photographer: Jvhertum, 2012, Wikimedia Commons

the need for shop space in city centres is decreasing due to overinvestments in the past and the increase in online purchasing. These phenomena are separate from the demographic decline, but in combination they lead to a considerable transformation of areas, and not to everyone's satisfaction.

The severity of the consequences of decline mainly depends on the other accompanying phenomena. In the case of neighbourhoods with demographic declines in large cities, such as Rotterdam-Zuid and Amsterdam-

Noord, it mainly concerns image problems and an accommodation offer which does not sufficiently fit with a diverse group of inhabitants. Since large cities offer more employment opportunities and social-cultural facilities than isolated villages, shrinking neighbourhoods often also benefit from the facilities in other parts of the city. In cities, in some cases it can be rewarding to invest in large projects. An iconic building or a revitalized area could have a flywheel function, which could result in the development of a city district with a demographic decline (Verheul 2013). For example, the eye-catching Eye Film Institute in Amsterdam-Noord attracts much attention, which hopefully also generates advantages for the surrounding area.

3 Combating decline with investments?

In addition to the reaction of playing down demographic decline, we have also seen other policy reactions in the Netherlands over the past few years. A familiar administrative reflex is to combat decline (Verwest 2011). "We can beat the demographic doom scenarios by the statisticians" is the thought. In this way, the existence of decline is indeed recognized, but the assumption is that it can be combated by marketing campaigns or investments in housing projects which will attract new inhabitants. A well-known example is the TV campaign 'Zuid-Limburg, je zal er maar wonen' ('Zuid-Limburg, the ideal place to live'): with low house prices, job prospects and beautiful images, inhabitants from the Randstad should be tempted to move to the very south of the Netherlands. But does it help to invest against the flow? We do not have such good experiences of that in the Netherlands. For example, the Blauwestad (2004-2010) in Groningen failed miserably as a housing project. Of the 1500 plots which were once available, barely more than 10% were sold and mainly to people from the neighbourhood. Even before the economic crisis began, this project appeared to be a wrong investment, where the parties involved suffered great losses. In the previously mentioned shrinking village of Ganzedijk, not far from the Blauwestad, the province and housing corporation tried to remove the social unrest with large sums of money and physical restructuring. Ganzedijk was saved from being demolished, but it was an expensive investment, as a result of which there was little money left for other shrinking villages in the region.

Municipalities in the Netherlands that have to deal with population decline also often make a case for investments in the economy and employment opportunities. The question is whether this works. Stimulating a declining industry such as shipbuilding on the part of the government often leads to forbidden state support. Furthermore, it usually amounts to a 'stay of execution'. At the same time, the expectations of new economic activity (for example energy, sustainability and smart industries) are usually too ambitious. The government does not have good experiences either with moving government services from the Randstad to the periphery. Decades ago, government offices and the postal services were already moved to Groningen, and the Public Sector Pension Fund and Statistics Netherlands were moved to Heerlen. Employees from the Randstad had to move then, but most of them were reluctant. The relocation of the government services is now widely considered a failure.

Policymakers in shrinking areas who invest in regional marketing, housing and economic activity ignore the fact that the inclination of Dutch people to move house over a long distance is very limited – just like other Europeans, they are home-loving. If they move house, they generally do so within their own municipality or region. Only 7% of Dutch people who move house move from one region to another: these people are often students, new graduates and single people who move to 'the big city' for their studies, work or relationship (Latten & Kooiman 2011). If regions with population decline wish to attract inhabitants, they have better chances to focus on 'return migrants': former inhabitants who are perhaps toying with the idea of returning to 'the old nest'.

4 Towards an approach of supporting decline

Chastened by the negative experiences with combating demographic decline, Dutch municipalities are gradually realizing that they will have to learn to live with shrinkage. This approach, which you could refer to as 'supporting decline', tries to mitigate the consequences of population decline as much as possible (Verwest 2011). This requires an approach 'at eye level' with relatively small-scale interventions in public space – so not architecture, but 'acupuncture'. For example, we see that in the town of Heerlen former miners' cottages are combined and flats are 'topped' by turning them into low-rise buildings.



Fig. 6: Cultural Centre Corneliushuis is a meeting point in the shrinking neighbourhood of Heerlerheide in the town of Heerlen; photographer: Hans Erren, 2012, Wikimedia Commons

Demolition is also sometimes unavoidable. The land that therefore becomes available is sometimes returned to nature, so that green zones develop in the neighbourhood. New build is possible, but only if this benefits the neighbourhood as a whole, an example of which is the Cultural Centre Corneliushuis in Heerlerheide.

However, demolition is not always necessary, as apparent a number of years ago in a declining district in the town of Dordrecht. The local housing corporation was planning to demolish the district of Noorderkwartier, until it heard from the Turkish and Antillean communities that the houses actually really suited their accommodation requirements. The upper apartments and ground floor apartments made it possible for grandparents to live above their children and grandchildren – they were therefore perfectly suited as ‘kangaroo houses’. The district has been renovated rather than demolished and as a result of this the local social capital could be maintained.

Supporting demographic decline does not mean that the consequences of it are always easy to accept. Some inhabitants have had their house up for sale for years and have no prospects of the situation improving. Furthermore, they have to look on with empty eyes as facilities disappear, such as the library and the swimming pool. To try telling these people that they have to get used to this situation is a difficult message from a political point of view. Administrators in areas in the Netherlands that have to deal with demographic decline are therefore becoming increasingly aware that it is vital to not abandon inhabitants in villages and neighbourhoods to their fate.

At the moment, the most frequent administrative reaction to demographic decline in the Netherlands is therefore to support inhabitants. This means, in consultation with numerous parties in the region, determining in which areas which facilities will remain and where that will no longer be possible. Clarity in this matter is important: inhabitants have to know what their situation is.

In addition, supporting population decline means helping to search for smart solutions to maintain the quality of life (Hospers & Reverda 2015). This requires creativity, for example by combining facilities, such as putting a library, cultural centre and meeting place into one multifunctional centre. There are also plenty of experiments being carried out in the Netherlands, using innovative concepts, such as mobile service points (buses travelling round), in order to bring government services to people’s own neighbourhood, instead of using an expensive municipal office. Another example is the development of shrinking areas into ‘laboratories’ for testing new techniques to allow people to live at home for longer, with the aid of for instance automated solutions or online services.

However, when considering the quality of life in shrinking places, it ultimately concerns people. This is why in precisely these areas we see a tendency where municipalities support inhabitants in entering into social connections in the neighbourhood: participation at local level. In every area in the Netherlands with demographic decline, we find initiatives by volunteers who try to maintain basic facilities in villages and districts. This active citizenship is certainly not a miracle cure, but it can bring inhabitants together and maintain an area’s quality of life. It would

be difficult for the government to impose and organize citizenship – at the most it can facilitate this. In Dutch areas that face demographic decline, more and more it seems to come down to the social resilience of people. Across the Netherlands, policymakers who wish to do something about demographic decline have learned from their mistakes: they now invest more in the human dimension of shrinkage than in large-scale projects which do not turn the tide after all.

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IV. Demography-Driven Suburban Decline – At the Crossroads: Mature Single-Family Housing Estates in Germany

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Abstract

In collaboration with IREUS, the Stuttgart Institute of Regional Development Planning and HFT, Stuttgart University of Applied Sciences, the ILS – Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development has conducted a research project (sponsored by the Wüstenrot Foundation) – analysing the quality of housing estates of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The project's objective was to develop recommendations for local authorities to enhance their post-war housing stock. In the following article, major results of this project will be presented.

With the original owners of these houses gradually decreasing, a generation change is now taking place. The demand for certain sections of this housing stock is quite low especially in specific regions of Germany. Alongside the decline in those population cohorts previously representing the major potential for house ownership, qualitative factors are having a rising influence

on demand. One observation that, due to an increasing multiplicity of lifestyles and their accompanying spatial and temporal flexibilisation, urban locations are set to gain in importance, being easier to access and offering a good infrastructure. The consequence will be that those houses in regions which are affected by demographic and economic problems as well as houses in sub-prime locations or real estates with structural or insulation deficits will suffer from a downturn in demand. This in turn signifies that in the future older houses will be more vulnerable to falling prices or even in certain cases remain vacant.

An analysis of West German municipalities led to a total of 14 municipalities being examined in five West German federal states. 13 of them are small and medium sized towns (at least 5,000 inhabitants). They supported in-depth case studies in specified areas through the provision of data. The research team conducted expert interviews with local officials and real estate experts, assessed detailed stock data of the selected areas, and asked inhabitants to answer a standardised questionnaire.