



Innovative Planning in Rural, Depopulating Areas: Conditions, Capacities and Goals

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INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are generally not considered to be hotspots for innovative planning practices. In both academia and planning practice, rural, peripheral and especially depopulating areas are regarded as backward and conservative, suffering from severe deprivation and lacking prospects. And yet, alternative voices increasingly stress the innovative potential of such areas. These voices demonstrate that rural depopulating areas are becoming the frontrunners of tomorrow's spatial planning (Bock, 2016; Eder, 2019; Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007; Ónega-López, Puppim de Oliveira, & Crecente-Maseda, 2010; Shearmur, 2015). In this chapter, we start out from these contradictory representations of the rural, and reflect on the conditions, capacities and goals for planning in rural areas.

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The introductory chapter in this volume draws heavily upon the intellectual heritage of John Friedmann (1966), who made a distinction between planning as allocation and planning as innovation. Planning as allocation—at that time the dominant planning paradigm—sought to reallocate scarce common resources and attempted to distribute them among a variety of needs in society in an allegedly “optimal” way. Innovative planning, on the other hand, was understood as a form of planning that sought to “legitimize new social objectives” or to reorder the ways in which existing objectives were prioritised in society. Innovative planning, Friedman argued, seeks to link certain understandings of what is valuable to both concrete action and new institutional settings. Resources, Friedman argued, are to be actively mobilised rather than just passively reallocated (Friedmann, 1966: 196).

In this chapter, we link back to the understanding of planning as a set of activities that involves *both* the allocation of limited resources *and* the mobilisation of new ones. We endorse the argument that there is a need for new and innovative modes of planning for the future in both urban and rural areas. In our understanding, however, there is no contradiction between the allocation and distribution of scarce resources and the attempts to mobilise new ones. On the contrary, we would argue that, as long as resources are limited—which is fairly often the case—planning will continue to involve an element of prioritisation, balancing and allocation. We would also argue that, if the existing resources are allocated in a transparent, well-founded and long-term way, it is more likely that there will be room for more innovative and creative forms of planning.

Our interest in the relation between the allocation of scarce resources and the mobilisation of new ones has its roots in our common experience of studying local development and planning in rural and depopulating parts of Germany, Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands (Meijer, Diaz-Varela, & Cardín-Pedrosa, 2015; Meijer & Syssner, 2017; Syssner & Meijer, 2017). These areas are often (if yet not always) characterised by diminishing access to vital societal resources. Thus, several studies have established that depopulation affects the resource base of a society in a multitude of ways. Access to an educated workforce diminishes, and the willingness among external investors and local entrepreneurs to invest declines (for an overview, see Meijer & Syssner, 2017). Real-estate and labour-related tax revenues tend to diminish; the physical infrastructure becomes excessive and properties can be difficult to sell or rent out. For private property owners and small enterprises, it can be hard to get loans

for real-estate renovations, since an investment will not always lead to increased market value.

Our joint experience of studying planning in rural contexts leads us to argue that planning in communities characterised by depopulation requires different strategies and methods than planning in growth areas. This is a statement that has been made by several voices before us. Several authors have called for alternative planning strategies for areas facing long-term population decline, or even for a paradigm shift in planning (Wiechmann, 2008; Hospers, 2014; Kempenaar, van Lierop, Westerink, van der Valk, & van den Brink, 2016). During the last decade, several planning theorists have successfully responded to the call for further studies on planning practices in a context of depopulation. Many such studies have, however, been accomplished in an urban context. Studies of planning in rural, depopulating areas are rarer. In this chapter, this is the centre of our attention.

In the text that follows, we endorse the need for innovative planning practices in depopulating, rural areas. To develop such planning practices, however, we need a greater understanding of three interrelated aspects of planning: (1) the planning conditions in depopulating, rural areas, (2) the planning capacity of public agencies in such places, and (3) the role of societal goals and objectives in the planning of places undergoing long-term population decline.

CONCEPTUALISING THE RURAL

How to define the rural has been a topic of debate among rural researchers for decades. The first conceptualisations discuss rural areas as dichotomous to urban areas: areas where urban structures—such as high-rise buildings, industry, high population densities and diverse and high levels of services—are absent. Additionally, small settlements, farmland, forests and nature are typically mentioned as attributes of the rural (Woods, 2005, 2015). During the 1990s, these descriptive definitions were slowly replaced by more constructivist views of the rural, paying more attention to what it meant to actually live in rural areas, and moving away from exact descriptions or trying to identify what is essential to rural areas (Cloeke & Little, 1997; Halfacree, 1993). On the one hand, these constructivist conceptualisations present an image of a “rural idyll”: an ideal countryside, away from chaotic and busy city life, where life is calm and beautiful and where close-knit communities prevail. On the other hand, this positive

image is countered by darker conceptualisations of the rural, highlighting backwardness, lack of innovative potential, unemployment and conservative and closed communities (Liepins, 2000; Woods, 2005).

Currently, the debate is moving towards more individual experiences with the rural. Rural areas can be perceived in diverse ways, depending on age, gender or your relation with these areas: being a mobile resident, autochthonous inhabitant, out-migrant or newcomer (Haartsen, Groote, & Huigen, 2003; Rye, 2006; Willett & Lang, 2018). Also, differences between growing and vital rural regions and declining, peripheral rural regions have become more apparent (Beetz, Huning, & Plieninger, 2008). In this matter, a distinction has been made between higher and lower amenity areas, where the latter includes depopulating, sparsely populated areas experiencing a lack of commercial and public services and limited potential for business development (Vuin, Carson, Carson, & Garrett, 2016).

This development has led to more diverse and balanced representations of rural areas. However, it also demonstrates the impossibility of providing a clear, absolute and satisfying definition of the rural. Yet, scholars such as Michael Woods (2005) argue that conceptualisations of the rural by planners and rural policymakers matter, and have significant impact on the formulation of rural policies and development paths: from conservative, ignorant or protectionist to a focus on economic diversification and community development.

METHODS AND DATA

The arguments in this chapter are based on broad experience from several previous and ongoing studies accomplished in rural and depopulating parts of Germany, Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands. In most of our studies, we have used a broad ethnographic approach. In some, we have focused specifically on local government representatives and formal planning agents (Syssner & Olausson, 2016), whereas in others, we have focused on informal community groups and bottom-up planning initiatives initiated by them outside of the governmental planning process (Syssner & Meijer, 2017). The ethnographic approach implies that we have made on-site visits to a large number of rural locations over the years. In most of these studies, we have also included policy documents (e.g. comprehensive and framework plans), newspaper articles and websites (i.e. of community-led planning projects) in our analysis.

In this chapter, however, we will refer particularly to one on-going sub-study, where we have an interest in understanding how rural planning is conceptualised by those who are professionally involved in it. In our study, we arranged one workshop with a group of rural planners in Sweden. Those who took part in the workshop were all involved in *Coast4Us*—an Interreg project in which local and regional planning authorities are seeking to achieve sustainably planned and managed marine and coastal areas. The planners involved in the Interreg project are seeking to develop an inclusive approach to the planning process, through involving stakeholders with different interests.

We have also distributed an online questionnaire among a wider network of rural planners or rural strategists, all of whom are members of a closed community on Facebook, called Rural Developers in Municipalities, Regions and County Administrative Boards.¹ The group is hosted by the Swedish Network for Rural Development, established in 2007 as a result of the EU Commission's decision that each member state that received EU funding for rural development should gather together stakeholders who are important to achieving the objectives of EU rural policy. The members of the community were given the opportunity to respond to a set of eight questions in an online questionnaire. The questions were open ended, and there was no limit to the length of their answers. Fourteen members responded to the questionnaire.

CONDITIONS, CAPACITIES AND GOALS FOR PLANNING

In our contribution, we reflect upon the conditions, capacities and goals for planning in rural, depopulating areas. We will use data from our workshop and survey, but will also refer to previous studies to illustrate our broader arguments. Next, we will first examine how the rural planners involved in our studies understand the planning conditions in depopulating, rural areas. We elucidate how they define rural areas and reflect upon the eventual implications of these definitions for planning practice. Subsequently, we will focus on how these planners understand the planning capacity in the areas concerned. Finally, we reflect on how they relate to the objectives, goals and visions for the future in the locations where they are active.

¹ Landsbygdsutvecklare på kommuner, regioner och länsstyrelser in the original.

The Rural and Its Planning Conditions

The results of our workshop and survey demonstrate that the rural planners in our study seem to start out from a negative or binary understanding of the rural. That is, rurality is defined first and foremost in negative terms or in terms of what it is *not*, that is in terms of non-urbanism. We have not inquired into how “urban” is understood by our informants or in other contexts. However, based on our theoretical frame of how the rural is conceptualised in general, we doubt that urban is defined or understood in a corresponding way—as deviating from the rural. The excerpts given next, drawn from our open-ended survey, illustrate the negative or binary understanding of the rural pretty well:

My thoughts often go to “non-density”—as opposed to “the city” as a concept.

I would say that the rural and the countryside is everything that is not a city

In our region we define it as everything “outside the central city”.

I would define it as everything outside the urban area

What the rural is can be very different in different parts of the municipality. It could be “everything outside the central city” for instance.

Other respondents brought up numerical definitions as the most relevant ones. During our workshop, some informants were very keen to stress that numerical definitions have the advantage of being simple and non-normative. The following excerpt, drawn from the survey, point in a similar direction:

In my work, I define the rural as everything except places with more than 3000 inhabitants

The municipality where I work uses the definition of the Leader method, that is every place with less than 10,000 inhabitants is rural.

Personally, I like the distance-based definition. Places with a travel time of over 45 minutes to a town with 3000 inhabitants (...) are sparse. The archipelago without a bridge connection to the mainland is always sparse.

Some of our informants saw rural areas primarily as remote and distant: places with few services that were sparsely populated. These definitions are in line with a very descriptive conceptualisation of the rural, as described earlier.

It's difficult to find a definition that fits throughout the country, but I like that this is about service and distance.

I would also think about ... sparse structures, small businesses, agriculture and forestry, recreation, natural resources, outdoor life, cultural heritage and traditions, associations and the people living in the countryside (local identity).

When we continued by asking what rural development agents understand as the most important planning conditions in rural areas, they framed the rural both in terms of resources and assets, and in terms of challenges. Concerning the resources and assets, three categories arise (see Fig. 9.1). First of all, the planners included in our study referred to those goods that cannot be produced or delivered by urban areas but are still essential for the livelihood of our society—in rural as well as in urban environments. Examples of such goods are steel, coal, wood, water-power, wind-power and food. These are resources that can be exported from rural areas—that is produced in a rural setting but sold to and consumed in cities. The planners in our study also referred to place-based resources that cannot be moved from or exported by the rural areas. In this category, we find representations of the rural as an idyllic, calm, peaceful and quiet place for recreation. The value of silence and calm may not be essential for society, and it cannot be transported from one setting to another, but it is still represented as a place-based, rural resource that brings improved quality of life to those who partake of it. A third category of strengths involves the innovativeness of the people who live there. The commitment, engagement and multiple competences of people living in rural areas are understood as leading to new and creative solutions for the problems experienced.

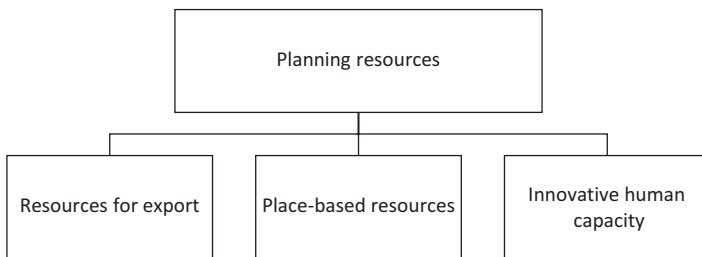


Fig. 9.1 Planning resources

When we asked about challenging planning conditions in rural areas, the rural planners—in both the workshop and the survey—came up with a rather long list of examples. Our analysis is that the rural planners in our material return to four basic, interrelated challenges, that is long distances, lack of political influence, weak financial capacity and destructive social attitudes (see Fig. 9.2).

Distance is mentioned as a planning condition with a whole range of implications. Our informants referred to sparse service structures, requiring citizens to travel long distances to gain access to public or commercial services. Others referred to distances as an obstacle when recruiting a new workforce. Long distances also imply high costs for infrastructure maintenance, or—from a citizen’s perspective—as something fostering car dependency and generating high costs for mobility. Digital accessibility could compensate for the effects of physical distance. However, network availability is not always guaranteed in rural, and especially peripheral, areas, which increases the remoteness of such areas.

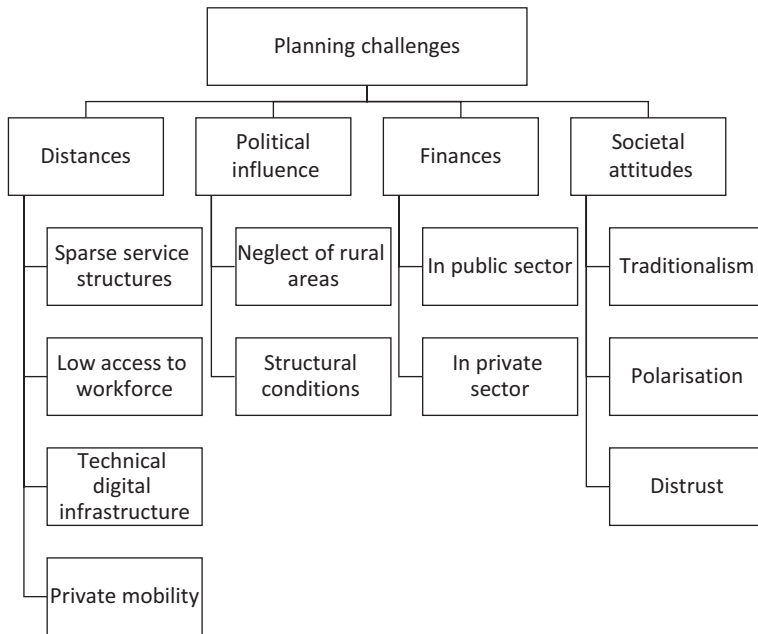


Fig. 9.2 Planning challenges in depopulating rural areas

The planners included in our study also referred to a lack of political influence as a challenging planning condition. The lack of priority compared to urban areas is understood to result in rural areas being granted fewer financial resources and a poor understanding of the special needs that arise in sparsely inhabited environments. Population decline, it is argued, implies that rural areas host a shrinking part of the electorate—which is believed to imply that rural votes are given less attention among political parties. It is not mentioned in the data, but we could add that local governments and planning authorities in rural, depopulating areas have limited options for making an impact on those trends that underpin all of their planning conditions, that is structural change and urbanisation.

The lack of financial resources in both public and private sectors are repeatedly referred to as a problem. Social welfare structures, it is argued, are consistently under-funded in rural areas, and many small-scale businesses, private entrepreneurs and households have experienced a lack of financial capital, and a limited ability to invest in maintenance or new projects.

Lastly, the rural planners in our study referred to destructive societal attitudes as a challenging planning condition. Citizens are sometimes referred to as being conservative or sentimental, or protectionist against influences from new residents in the area. The informants also explained, however, that the lack of adequate finances and priority given to rural areas prevents an adequate distribution of services and that this, in turn, stimulates sentiments of polarisation, exclusion and diverting interests at the community level.

The Rural and Its Planning Capacity

It is obvious that the planning conditions in a small, shrinking, rural municipality differ from those in large growing municipalities. But how could the planning *capacity* of planning authorities in these areas be described? That is, what capacity do the planning authorities in rural areas have to act on the conditions they face? The distinction between planning conditions and planning capacity is based on the notion that good conditions can be ruined by organisations with limited capacities, and vice versa, that troublesome planning conditions can be compensated for by a well-developed planning capacity.

Based on our previous studies (Syssner, 2018), we would argue that, although differences can be identified, planning authorities in rural,

depopulating areas share some central characteristics that are important to identify if we are seeking to gain a deeper understanding of planning in such areas. To begin with, planning departments in rural and depopulating areas tend to be small. During our field studies, we have visited planning departments where one single planner is responsible for all the planning issues in the municipality. In such an organisation, there is no room for planning specialists. In a larger organisation, colleagues in the planning department could focus on different aspects of planning: environmental planning, physical planning, strategic planning, infrastructure, investments, maintenance and so on and benefit from each other's expertise and ideas. Small organisations do not have that option; here, the planners must be true generalists. The generalist perspective can be an advantage in many ways; it is easier to adopt a holistic perspective and generate policies based upon the interests of the entire organisation. At the same time, they lack the in-depth and expert perspective that can be found in larger organisations.

Rural, depopulating areas are also characterised by close relationships between planners, policymakers and stakeholders (Jakobsen & Kjaer, 2016; Oliver, 2014). Proximity is a major advantage in many contexts. It is very feasible for local government to have an ongoing dialogue with citizens. Citizens are generally well informed about who controls and works in the municipality. Community needs are often communicated at an early stage with municipal officers, which greatly increases the adaptive capacity of both governmental and community organisations to find solutions. With some financial and procedural support, communities can, for example, take over or establish public services themselves. But even though there are advantages to proximity, it also presents challenges. When planners or elected officials are closely related to those affected by decisions, there is a risk of bias. Unpopular but necessary decisions thus become difficult to make. Conversely, the risk of positive discrimination or patronage by close acquaintances may increase as well.

Furthermore, the external networks of planning authorities differ between rural depopulating areas and dense growth areas. In some rural localities, a single employer can account for a large proportion of the private labour market. In other localities, the private sector is dominated by a web of small family businesses. Both situations are important for determining what the planning authorities' external network may look like. The rural planners in our studies habitually refer to civil-society organisations and private village initiatives as important for their planning practice

(Syssner & Meijer, 2017). Such partners are often referred to as a resourceful and innovative pool of planning potential (Bjärstig & Sandström, 2017). From our previous studies, we know that rural communities are capable of taking over planning tasks that hitherto were in the realm of the public sector. Local communities generally feel responsible for the future of their village and have a history of taking matters into their own hands. It is important not to underestimate the planning capacity of such rural communities: we found that initiators rely on local as well as professional knowledge (e.g. many of them are highly educated and have experience of working in administration, engineering, accounting, construction or the public sector). Building on their networks, these initiators found creative ways of attracting new pools of resources, including financial (sponsorship, subsidies, community businesses), human (volunteers, man-power), physical (locations, vacant buildings) and organisational (NGOs such as Hela Sverige Ska Leva, new forms of public meetings) (Syssner & Meijer, 2017).

Against this background, we would argue for a broadened and context-sensitive interpretation of what planning capacity may mean. Local governments and public planning agents in rural and depopulating areas may lack many of the resources that can be found in large planning organisations in dense, urban growth areas. However, in the setting under study in this chapter, it is obvious that societal organisations and businesses also need to be included in innovative governance models.

The Rural and Its Planning Goals

Friedman's distinction between planning as allocation and planning as innovation is commendable. In some ways, this distinction is a precursor to the contemporary distinction between policies for distribution and policies for growth and development. Even though we endorse Friedman's call for more proactive planning, we would say that most local planning models of today start out from the premise that growth is both a planning condition and an unequivocal aim. In the shrinking cities literature, severe criticism has been directed towards the habitual framing of growth as something positive, and the common-sense idea that depopulation and shrinkage are by definition something negative (Hollander & Németh, 2011; Mallach, 2017; Schlappa, 2017).

From our perspective, it seems as though policy and planning agents are stuck in a given configuration of path dependencies (see Beunen,

Meijer, & De Vries, 2019; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2014). One such path is goal dependence, previously understood as the dependence on shared visions of the future (Beunen et al., 2019), or as “the effects of previous choices” (Van Assche, Hornidge, Schlüter, & Vaidianu, 2019: 4). In a previous volume (Syssner, 2018), we have argued that the determination to plan for growth can be hard to alter. If a local government has spent years investing in growth rhetoric, giving up on that goal may either signal that the former goals were mistaken or signal that the local government failed to reach the goals set at the outset. Both options are undesirable for an organisation that is dependent on the legitimacy it gains from citizens.

In the literature on shrinkage, alternative planning goals have been put forward. Several voices have advocated that depopulation can bring benefits, if it is skilfully handled (Hospers, 2014; Hospers & Reverda, 2015; Pallagst, Fleschurz, & Said, 2017: 2). When shrinkage is framed as an advantage, or as an opportunity that cannot be missed, certain features tend to be brought to the fore. Sousa and Pinho (2013: 6) conclude that fewer people means significant traffic reductions, reduced lanes, less traffic in side streets and better parking options. Hospers and Reverda (2015: 44) stress that that fewer people mean “less fuss, less air pollution, and more space”. Often, the shrinking cities literature tells us that, in shrinking urban environments, land previously used for parking, houses, roads, or unattractive buildings can be converted into green areas (Pallagst, Martinez-Fernandez, & Wiechmann, 2015). Old shopping centres could be converted (Audirac, 2015) and a renewed zoning system could provide improved options for shrinking cities (Hollander, 2018). In the literature, this discourse is referred to as smart shrinking (Pallagst et al., 2009).

In the rural and sometimes extremely sparsely populated areas that we have studied, it is difficult to see any advantage at all arising from numbers becoming even fewer. The advantages of a lower population density may be immense in an urban planning context but in remote and rural areas such advantages are completely invisible. Politicians, planners or citizens do not experience any lack of green areas, and “greening the area” is not a very promising planning measure here. In locations where the main traffic issues are long distances, poorly maintained roads and sparse public transport, traffic reduction is not a positive trait either. This indicates that some of the theoretical thinking on smart shrinking cities, based on studies of large industrial cities in Europe and the USA, might not be applicable in a rural and sparsely populated context.

In these areas, there is a need for innovative planning that attempts to mobilise further resources (Bock, 2016). There is, however, also a need for innovative ideas on how to adapt and adjust local government operations to a diminishing resource base.

Here, we endorse the argument that the planning of depopulating areas “calls for a new vocabulary” (Cunningham-Sabot, Audirac, Fol, & Martinez-Fernandez, 2015: 14) capable of describing both the processes of shrinkage and their effects (see also Hollander, 2018: 41). In recent publications (Syssner, 2016, 2018, 2020), we have made a distinction between Plan A and Plan B—that is between policies and planning for growth, versus policies and planning for adaptation. In simple words, Plan A may be to plan for growth and the mobilisation of new and expanding resources. But if Plan A does not work out, there is a genuine need for a Plan B, that is a policy and a plan for how to adapt the region to a new demographic situation. This plan will inevitably include elements of what Friedmann (1966) might have referred to as the allocation of scarce common resources, and attempts to distribute them in the best possible ways along a variety of sometimes competing needs within society. In previous publications, we have demonstrated that adaptation to new demographic conditions in depopulating areas involves prioritisation and a variety of harsh decisions—on closures, savings and layoffs (Syssner, 2016, 2018, 2020). We have also argued that these decisions could be better prepared for if they were processed in dialogue with citizens and other local governments that are experiencing a similar situation. We have also called for more explicit adaptation policies, formulated and established by politicians who can be held accountable in public elections.

Figure 9.3 illustrates the differences between local growth policy and local adaptation policy. Our argument here is not that plans or policies for growth should be replaced by policies or plans for adaptation. Rather, we argue that these are two different policy areas and two different planning practices. These plans and policies need to be developed according to their own prerequisites but should also link to and support each other in a positive way. In the words of Scott, Gallent, and Gkartzios (2019), planning in rural areas should be positioned as an enabler of, rather than a barrier to, rural economic and social development.

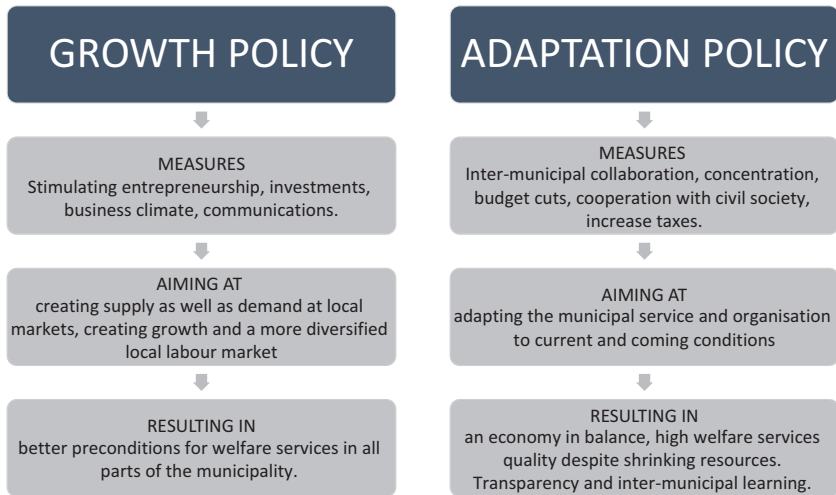


Fig. 9.3 Local growth policy and local adaptation policy. (Source: Syssner, 2018)

CONCLUSION

In the planning literature, there is a growing demand for innovation. Some of these calls stem from a distinction between planning as the allocation of scarce resources and planning as a means to mobilise new resources towards new social objectives (Friedmann, 1966). In this chapter, we have approached planning as a set of activities that involves *both* the allocation of limited resources *and* the mobilisation of new ones. That is, allocation and innovation are not contradictory practices but complementary and overlapping. Based on our studies of planning in rural and depopulating parts of Germany, Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands, we have argued that, if existing resources are allocated in a transparent, well-founded and long-term way, it is more likely that there will be room for innovative and creative forms of planning. Throughout our studies, however, we have noticed that the conditions, capacity and goals for planning in rural areas may differ from the conditions, capacity and goals in dense, urban growth regions. Any inquiry into more innovative planning practices in rural areas thus needs to consider the specific context of such areas.

The planning conditions in rural areas are shaped to a large extent either by resources that can be exported and consumed outside of the rural context, or by place-based resources that must be experienced and

consumed in a particular place. Silence, calm and peaceful surroundings are examples of such place-based resources. The planning conditions are, however, also shaped by long distances, limited access to political influence and scarce financial capital. In our material, societal attitudes are referred to in both positive and negative terms; citizens are referred to both as conservative and protectionist—and as committed and innovative.

In our discussion of the planning capacity in rural areas, we advocate a “broadened interpretation” of the term. Citizens, societal organisations and businesses have to be included in innovative governance models as well. Where urban areas can rely on local governments and their capacity to plan, sparsely populated areas lack affluent resources (e.g. budgets, services and specialists). On the flipside, this leads to more loosely organised administrative bodies, less restrictive regulations and accessible officials. Under these conditions, the capacity of other stakeholders to plan can lead to alternative development paths and planning goals, focusing on adapting rather than forcing unrealistic futures. Municipalities in metropolitan areas are also being urged to undergo budget cuts and deregulation, and to search for collaborations with businesses, society and other public bodies. Yet, rural areas may very well become frontrunners in developing new planning practices, because of depopulation, and not in spite of it.

In this chapter, we have also argued that the planning goals in rural depopulating areas need to diverge from planning goals in growth regions. Still, there is no vocabulary for such alternative goals. Shifting the debate from smart growth to smart shrinkage barely covers the challenges faced by rural peripheral areas. To plan and innovate in rural, depopulating areas, a clear diagnosis of its challenges, limitations, strengths and assets is incomprehensible. Such a diagnosis (based on population statistics, economic performance and available budgets) provides an honest view of what we are waiting for. This in turn is necessary to avoid trivialisation and to formulate alternative planning goals, focusing on new possibilities and the positive aspects of living in sparsely populated area.

Altogether, we call for a planning practice that endorses and communicates the need for the allocation of scarce resources. Limited financial resources and scarce public finances are a matter of fact in many rural communities today. However, we also call for planning practices that are innovative in their interpretation of what a resource is and what planning capacity may mean. Planning agents in rural areas may be deficient in some of the resources that can be found in urban environments. But with a more context-sensitive and open-minded interpretation of what a resource

may be, rural planning can become more successful in mobilising them. Lastly, we urgently call for alternative planning goals in rural areas. In any event, there will also be rural areas facing depopulation in the future. For these areas, there is a need for innovative policies and plans for how to adapt society to a new demographic situation.

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