



# Getting ahead in depopulating areas - How linking social capital is used for informal planning practices in Sweden and The Netherlands



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to critically examine patterns of linking social capital that emerge from the interaction between non-governmental and governmental planning agents. We address this issue by, first, identifying elements of informality in planning practices developed by rural communities facing a long-term demographic decline and, second, how these elements of informality are linked to formal planning practices at the level of local government. Our paper builds on the concept informality to contextualise the shift from formal to informal in planning practices, and on theories on linking social capital to highlight the strategies rural communities develop to get ahead. We follow a comparative case-study design, with in-depth qualitative analysis of informal planning practices in the Netherlands and in Sweden. Based on our empirical findings, we distinguish three patterns of linking social capital: minimal linking, functional linking and reactive linking. In communities where social capital is well developed, municipalities may rely on community initiatives. However, informal planning can be problematic in communities with low levels of social capital. To prevent planning vacuums and large inequalities between localities, we conclude with several options for the future of these communities.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural areas all over Europe face a situation of population decline (Hospers, 2013). Several studies demonstrate that a long-term population decline creates a variety of significant consequences for local governments and local communities. A decrease in population numbers entails a lower economic out-turn per inhabitant and lower levels of investment (Fjertorp, 2013, p. 28). Labour-related tax revenues tend to diminish in these municipalities, while there are limited possibilities to spread the costs of pre-schools, schools, and eldercare (Haase et al., 2012, p. 12; Hollander, 2011, p. 132). Another clear consequence of shrinking regions is that the physical infrastructure becomes excessive. Buildings remain empty and business premises are difficult to rent out. Houses and building plots become difficult to sell. Schools with inadequate pupil bases may be closed, but the school buildings

continue to generate costs if they cannot be sold or rented out to some other business. Furthermore, the need for education, health care, well-maintained roads and other public services continues to exist, though used by a smaller number of people.

Local communities are directly affected by population decline in the sense that the size and the composition of the community are altered. Several studies have emphasised that certain groups – singles, young people, women, highly educated, qualified and well-paid individuals – have a higher propensity to move to bigger cities. These circumstances – understood as processes of “selective out-migration” (Weck and Beißwenger, 2014, p. 4) – change the social capital structure in these localities.

However, local communities are also *indirectly* affected by depopulation in the sense that local governments often meet depopulation with a change in how welfare services such as pre-schools, schools, elder care, public transport and similar are localised. Furthermore, devolution of planning tasks - from state levels to local levels - is taking place in most European countries. In their turn, local governments cut back services they used to deliver, or leave these tasks to citizens. This process is also indicated as ‘double devolution’ (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015). Double devolution

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does not only imply a shift from one tier of governance to another, but also a shift from formal to more informal planning practices. While higher level governments plan predominately in a top-down, formal way; non-governmental actors, like citizens, plan in a more spontaneous, ad-hoc, unregulated manner, building on their informal networks and everyday interactions (Meijer et al., 2015). In depopulating areas this process is increased due to financial and organisational challenges of population decline.

Depopulation in rural areas and its consequences for local governments and for local communities form the background for our research. Taking out from a comparative case study approach, we seek to broaden the understanding for how local governments and communities meet with the challenges following from a long term population decline. Our comparative case study consists of two rather comparable regions in Sweden (Östergötland) and The Netherlands (De Achterhoek), that are affected by depopulation. Sweden and The Netherlands are two countries that have long traditions in both statutory planning and stakeholder involvement, but also developed diverging ways in dealing with community initiatives. Here, we have a particular interest in spatial planning practices performed by non-governmental actors (NGA's). Besides exploring how they plan, we will focus our analysis on the ways in which their activities relate to and interact with planning practices performed by governments. NGA's can indeed plan for themselves, in informal ways and autonomously from governmental parties. Yet, vertical interaction with formal structures and formal planning processes can form part of an informal planning strategy, performed by NGA's (Meijer et al., 2015). Community - government interactions can also be understood as an inevitable part of the planning process. Much has been written about these interactions (Booher and Innes, 2002; Cornwall, 2008; Eversole, 2012; Gallent, 2013). Nevertheless, planning initiated by NGA's and interactions that result from these bottom-up practices (instead of NGA's being invited to planning arena's by governments) still is a blind spot in spatial planning practice and research (Boonstra, 2016), particularly in rural areas marked by population decline (Hospers, 2014).

Depopulating rural regions form an interesting context for these types of planning practices for two reasons. *Firstly*, European municipalities experience difficulties developing spatial plans for depopulating areas (Sysner and Olausson, 2016). The future of these regions is referred to as insecure and problematic, and decision-making is complicated by considerably higher planning costs (Pallagst et al., 2009). In depopulating areas, it is much more costly to maintain an equal proximity to public facilities (like schools, health care, and public transport) as in other areas. These difficulties can lead to a vacuum in spatial planning for depopulation regions. Less income and fewer possibilities for economic and social development result in status where less formalised future plans are developed. In this vacuum, some governments decide to focus planning on more viable regions, leaving depopulating areas without future visions. Other local governments search for alternatives for developing spatial plans: they outsource planning tasks via the involvement of other (non-governmental) stakeholders (Hospers, 2013).

*Secondly*, not all citizens living and working in depopulation areas have a desire to out-migrate. Some of them experience a strong regional connection and responsibility for their local environment (Li et al., 2016). Like in other contexts citizens want to have an active voice and regain control over decision-making for their local environment (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015). This makes that NGA's often are eager to take over planning tasks and develop initiatives that improve their living circumstances, especially in the context of the before-described planning vacuum (Beetz et al., 2008; Meijer et al., 2015).

This paper is based on a comparative case study focusing on the

interaction between planning practices performed by non-governmental and governmental actors in depopulating areas. In the course of our field-studies in Östergötland (Sweden) and De Achterhoek (The Netherlands), we observed different types of community-government interactions. Taking out from these observations, this paper aims to critically examine patterns of linking social capital that emerge from the interaction between non-governmental and governmental planning agents. At a more general level, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of the formation of linking social capital in depopulating areas.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: in section *two* we discuss our theoretical points of departure, based on theories on (linking) social capital in perspective of a shift in planning practices towards informality. In section *three*, we clarify our methods and the cases under study. In short, the empirical body of the paper is based on qualitative field research in two case study regions. We analysed planning practices performed by several local communities in two depopulating areas in Sweden and The Netherlands: Östergötland and De Achterhoek. The *fourth* section presents the findings of the research. Our observations and analysis of community-government interactions led to a typology of three interaction types: minimal linking, functional linking and reactive linking. The concept (linking) social capital is used to map how planning is practiced by communities, and how they interact with governments and vice versa. *Finally*, in our conclusions we critically reflect on community-government interactions and the significance of social capital, based on our empirical findings in both regions and the theoretical framework. We conclude with some recommendations for localities with low levels of social capital.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual points of departure

This paper forms part of an overall ambition to understand the interaction between governmental and non-governmental planning practices in depopulating areas. In this endeavor, we first need to define what is to be understood as *planning* and the shift towards *informal planning* in this context and to what challenges the interactions between the various actors lead. Below, we draw on conceptualisations developed by amongst others Van Assche et al. (2014), Altrock (2012) and Eversole (2012) to define this shift and outline the context of our research.

To examine the various patterns of linking social capital, we however also need a theoretical frame that helps us understand the motives for and benefits of using linking social capital. Here, this theoretical frame is based on previous writings about social capital (Putnam, 1995; Woolcock, 2001; Gallent, 2013).

### 2.1. A shift towards informality in planning

In this study we define spatial planning as decision-making aiming to coordinate different processes of spatial organisation (Van Assche and Verschraegen, 2008). (Spatial) planning practices refer to process of making and implementing those decisions. Spatial planning theories, to continue, have traditionally focused on the role of governments. In recent planning studies, however, there is a shift visible towards planning practices initiated from below, by civilians, entrepreneurs and NGO's (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Van Assche et al., 2014). A significant amount of these studies are performed in the absence of formal planning procedures and regulations (Altrock, 2012; Roy, 2009; Watson, 2009).

The emergent interest in planning performed by others than governmental actors led to the introduction of the concept of informality in planning (Briassoulis, 1997; Roy, 2005). Informality focuses on planning practices that are unregulated, uncontrolled, spontaneous planning practices performed by any actor (with a

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