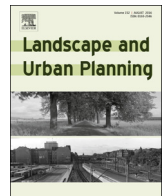




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Research paper

Translating a wicked problem: A strategic planning approach to rural shrinkage in Denmark

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Rural shrinkage is a wicked problem.
- Rural shrinkage can be addressed by strategic planning at municipal level.
- Actor-Network Theory provides a framework to study strategic planning processes.
- Strategic projects can assemble strategic partners to work for strategic visions.
- Collaborative strategic projects can contribute to sustainable adaptation.

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ABSTRACT

In a time of increasing globalisation and urbanisation, shrinking peripheral rural areas have become a truly wicked planning problem in many European countries. Although a problem can be easily perceived and measured by various indicators, the precise definition of the problem is problematic. Based on the case of a Danish planning process which was carried out in collaboration with a charitable trust, this paper discusses an emerging strategic planning approach at the municipal level. We use the concept of wicked problems, strategic planning theory and Actor-Network-Theory to study a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented process directed at concrete physical outcomes. We frame strategic planning as a translation process where the interaction between human and non-human actors translates a unique, complex and contested situation into an innovated situation. We find that local physical projects played a major role in this process. First, they acted as a vehicle that assembled planners, politicians and stakeholders to work towards strategic visions across multiple scales. Second and consequently, they stimulated considerable second and third order effects in the form of shared problem-understandings, increased social capital, and follow-up projects initiated beyond the actual planning process. We conclude that local physical projects, when conceived in a collaborative and strategic manner, can contribute to sustainable adaptation to rural shrinkage.

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1. Introduction

Although Denmark is a small, urbanised country, rural shrinkage is considered a major policy and planning issue. Since the 1990s, work places and the population have been increasingly concentrated in the bigger cities, while peripheral rural areas lost up to 7% of their population between 2007 and 2012 and 7.8% of their work places between 2009 and 2011 ([Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013](#)).

Over the years, many European and national policies have been implemented to ensure economic development in rural areas.

Recently, a shift in European rural policy has occurred ([Bryden and Hart, 2004](#)). The “new rural paradigm” involves a move away from financial redistribution and agricultural subsidies towards strategic investments which exploit local strengths and opportunities ([OECD, 2006](#)). This policy shift has also influenced Danish rural policies ([Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013](#)). In addition, a structural reform in 2007 reduced the number of Danish municipalities from 275 to 98 and obliged the new municipalities to formulate a municipal policy for rural development, thus allocating policy and planning measures related to rural shrinkage to the municipal level.

The situation in the shrinking rural periphery of Denmark is a typical case of a “wicked problem” ([Rittel & Webber, 1973](#)). The general symptoms are well-described: out-migration and ageing, lower educational attainment and lower employment rates

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(Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013). However, defining the problem, i.e. “knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition”, is much more difficult (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 153). Each local situation is unique, socially contested and constantly changing due to many factors at multiple scales. Therefore, formulating a planning problem is interconnected with the process of its solution (Skaburskis, 2008). Furthermore, finding definitive solutions to the planning problem is virtually impossible because any solution will generate “waves of repercussions” over an extended period of time. At best, the problem can, thus, be “re-solved—over and over again” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160).

In partnership with a charitable trust, the peripheral rural municipality of Thisted took this wickedness as a starting point for a new strategic planning approach to address rural shrinkage at the municipal level. From 2007–2012, the planning initiative “Land of Opportunities” was based on a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented approach which resulted in six strategic projects. The primary purpose was not to achieve economic growth, but, with reference to the new rural paradigm, to preserve and strengthen place-based qualities and potential through local physical projects (Sloth Hansen, Møller Christensen, & Skou, 2012).

This paper analyses this planning process with a focus on one project, “The Good Life at the Seaside”. Our purpose is to contribute to substantiating an emerging strategic planning approach to the wicked problem of rural shrinkage both empirically and theoretically, focusing on the following questions:

- What is the planners’ role in a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented strategic planning process?
- How are collaborative decisions made?
- What strategic effects can local physical interventions achieve?

2. Theoretical approach

2.1. From wicked problems to a communicative rationality

Rittel and Webber’s seminal article “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” from 1973 still effectively dismantles every attempt to develop planning as a scientific discipline. They showed that problems dealt with by planning are essentially different from scientific problems and, therefore, require an essentially different approach. In contrast to “tame” scientific problems, they argued that planning problems are “wicked” by nature. Therefore, linear strategies, which strive for definite solutions, do not apply to planning problems. Instead, Rittel and Webber proposed “a model of planning as an argumentative process in the course of which an image of the problem and of the solution emerges gradually among the participants, as a process of incessant judgement” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p.162). Although they did not altogether leave the technical rationality that dominated the design methods discourse of the 1960s, Rittel and Webber, thus, prepared the ground for a new communicative planning rationality.

Today wicked problem thinking is proving to be productive for planning theory once again. Scholars in environmental planning have framed climate change and sustainability issues as wicked problems and have prescribed multi-actor networks and collaborative partnerships to address them (Artman, 2015; Detoni & Bitzer, 2015; Frame, 2008; Hartmann, 2012; Hocking, Brown, & Harris, 2016; Perry, 2015). Xiang suggests that an *adaptive, participatory, and transdisciplinary* approach involving “collective learning, exploration, and experimentation” is appropriate for tackling wicked planning problems, including both experts’ and laymen’s knowledge (Xiang, 2013, p. 2). Similarly, Innes and Booher argue for the development of a *collaborative rationality* through

non-linear, collaborative and transdisciplinary processes, which can produce socially valuable outcomes, while being adaptive to the opportunities and challenges of their unique and changing context (Innes & Booher, 2010).

2.2. Learning-oriented strategic planning

Whereas Innes and Booher primarily discuss policy issues, other related theorists focus on spatial planning issues with similar reasoning, albeit without making a link to the concept of wicked problems: learning-oriented strategic planning theory advocates an adaptive, collaborative and transdisciplinary approach to complex planning situations (Albrechts, 2004, 2006; Healey, 1997, 2007).

Based on a literature review, Kühn has developed a normative model of strategic planning which outlines the overall characteristics of this approach (Fig. 1) (Kühn, 2010a, p. 2). According to this model, strategic planning can be defined as the recursive interaction between strategic visions and strategic projects.

Strategic visions are long-term development visions for a city or municipality as a whole, which guide action and serve as important tools for building local consensus. To this end, they are based on social negotiation and participation, as well as a comprehensive analysis of present development challenges and opportunities.

Strategic projects are short-term and directed towards selected local areas, generating immediate results for the actors involved. To be strategic, such local projects should steer development in the envisioned direction. At the same time, the limited scale and scope of projects allows one to continuously evaluate and adjust the overall vision.

Strategic planning relies on strategic partnerships to connect visions and projects; both cross-departmental partnerships within the local public administration and co-operation between public and private actors (Kühn, 2010a, 2010b).

Kühn’s model suggests that strategic planning requires a new type of planning professionalism which; (1) facilitates collaborative processes involving many different actors; (2) integrates transdisciplinary knowledge and; (3) works strategically across multiple scales. Planning professionalism, thus, takes on a new meaning, which is to perceive and instigate productive relationships between people, ideas and places in a strategic perspective. Healey speaks of “a relational planning for our times” (Healey, 2007).

2.3. Strategic planning as a translation process

We draw on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to study how such productive relationships are constructed. The ANT-account is a method for describing how complex connections between human and non-human actors are constructed for a certain purpose (Latour, 2005). Originally developed in relation to research and technological innovation processes, ANT is increasingly being used in urban studies (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Farias & Bender, 2010; Latour, Hermant, & Shannon, 1998) and in spatial planning and design theory (Boelens, 2010; Healey, 2007; Rydin, 2010; Tietjen, 2011; Yaneva, 2009, 2012).

ANT proposes “the idea of engagement with socio-technical systems rather than just with the (human) actors as the key to understanding planning outcomes and offering a better planning practice” (Rydin, 2010, p.266). According to ANT, human and non-human actors gather in interdependent, dynamic *actor-networks* through transformative interaction. Therefore, we can define a planning situation as a series of dynamic connections between human and non-human actors that form a “momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together in new shapes” (Latour, 2005, p. 65). For ANT, *agency* – the capacity to act in the world – is not limited to intentional human action. Indeed

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