



Migration intentions of rural youth in the Westhoek, Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën, The Netherlands

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'Should I stay or should I leave my home region?' is one of the key life course questions that many young people must address as they grow to maturity. Social mobility increasingly presupposes geographical mobility, especially in rural areas. The consequences of the selective out-migration of socially mobile young people ('brain drain') are seen as a threat to the economic development and reputation of rural areas. The out-migration of young rural people is often related to participation in higher education and entrance into the labour market. This paper focuses on the migration intentions of pupils in secondary education in two peripheral rural areas: The Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands. It analyses, by means of logistic regression analysis, the migration intentions of 611 pupils in the Westhoek and 294 pupils in the Veenkoloniën in relation to their social background, migration history, perceptions of employment opportunities and the way they identify with their home region. In both regions, perceived employment opportunities and local attachment appear to be the most important factors explaining migration intentions. In the Veenkoloniën, in contrast with the Westhoek, migration history, educational level and representations of the region are also important factors determining the migration intentions of young people. These results can be explained by differences in the structure, culture and landscape of the two regions.

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1. Introduction

Many rural areas in North-West Europe experience a net out-migration of the young population (Council of Europe, 1980; Rees et al., 1996; Muil et al., 2004; Jauhiainen, 2009; King et al., 2006; Thissen and Poelman, 2009). Highly educated young people in particular are inclined to leave these areas. Policymakers are concerned about this 'brain drain' and see the selective out-migration of socially mobile young people as a threat to the economic development and reputation of the region (Stockdale, 2006). A growing number of rural areas in Europe is facing a decline in population that is related to the ageing of the European population. In addition, they are experiencing a second wave of dejuvenation resulting from the rising participation of young rural people in higher education and their migration to national employment centres (King, 2002; Harts, 2008; Findlay et al., 2009). This concerns not only rural regions at NUTS-2 level that are a great distance from the main metropolitan regions in Europe but also

peripheral rural regions at NUTS-3 level within small urbanized countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium.

For young people, the question 'Should I stay or should I leave my home region?' is only one of the many they face as they grow to maturity. Staying in the region where one was born is no longer a matter of course, but the result of an individual life course decision (Garasky, 2002; Mulder, 2003). Social mobility increasingly presupposes geographical mobility, especially in rural areas (Jamieson, 2000; Stockdale, 2004). The globalization of the economy and the social and cultural processes involved in individualization mean that young people have become less dependent on the opportunities within the region in which they were born (Liefbroer and De Jong Gierveld, 1995).

The transition from secondary to higher education is crucial because it provides the impetus for young people to decide to migrate (Mulder and Clark, 2002). Most rural areas have limited educational opportunities. Moreover, many young people prefer to continue their education in an urban setting. Consequently, one group of young people makes their permanent home outside their home region, while another group returns to their home region after graduation. Not all of them will – temporarily or permanently – leave their home area. Some commute from their parental home to college or

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university in a nearby urban centre, while others decide not to participate in higher education and stay in their home area instead. Entry into the labour market is another important impetus when deciding whether to leave or to stay. Employment opportunities, in particular for the more highly educated, are scarce in many peripheral rural areas (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004; Muilu and Rusanen, 2003).

Although globalization and individualization are common characteristics of all North-West European countries, the consequences of this for the migration-decisions of young people in rural areas differ. This is partly because of differences in education and employment structure and partly because of cultural differences. Despite the uniforming effects of general developments such as urbanization, Europeanization and globalization, rural areas in Europe still exhibit many differences. Rurality in Europe is nation-specific (Hoggart et al., 1995). Some rural areas offer fewer opportunities and are more distant from urban centres than others. Countries and regions are culturally different with respect to the individualization of young people. This can influence the mean age at which young people leave the parental home, whether single young people live independently (Corijn and Manting, 2000) and the importance of the home region in the identity formation of young people (Bauman, 1992; Jones, 1999). Countries differ in their size, settlement structure and position within Europe. Countries and regions differ in amenities that are of growing importance for a more consumptive (residential or recreational) development (Steenbekkers et al., 2006). Finally, rural regions have a different settlement history, which has consequences for whether the inhabitants feel that they belong and how they identify with the region.

Whereas recent studies on rural youth migration in Europe refer to one specific region or to regions within one national context, this article analyses the migration intentions of the rural youth in two different national contexts in Europe: the Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium (see also Thissen et al., 2007), and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands. It analyses the migration intentions of pupils in secondary education in relation to background characteristics, migration history, perceptions of employment opportunities and identification with the home region. The comparison of the migration intentions of the rural youth in two rural regions within two different nations in Europe allows us to evaluate the meaning of structural and cultural factors within different regional and national contexts. This provides an illustration of the nation-specific meaning of rurality in Europe.

2. Rural youth migration

The theme of rural youth migration can be approached both from the perspective of the region and from the perspective of the young individual. The first approach focuses on the economic development of rural areas and on villages as social milieus (Stockdale, 2006). Some important issues are the rate and type of employment in the region, the characteristics of the labour supply within the region and the age structure and social cohesion within the local communities. The economic and social capital within the region and the communities are considered success factors; young people are supposed to make a start in adult life and form their own identities within the home region and community (Coleman, 1988; Stolle and Hooghe, 2004; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006). From this perspective, a net out-migration of the young population is seen as a failure.

From the perspective of the young individual, geographical mobility (migration) is related to social mobility (Rye, 2006a). In the life course decisions of the current generation of young people, the region and community where one is born has become less

relevant than in former generations. Socially mobile young people focus on educational and employment opportunities outside their home region. Staying in their home region is just one of many options. An attachment to the place where they were born is no longer decisive in the identity formation of rural young people (Jones, 1999). A place is seen more and more as somewhere to reside in the short-term at a specific time of life. Highly educated young people are increasingly cosmopolitan rather than being 'deeply rooted' in the rural community (Keur and Keur, 1955; De Valk, 2006; Weenink, 2008). However, even in a globalizing world not everybody is a globalist. According to Gustafson (2001), a dichotomy exists, in which the poor and powerless are strongly attached to the (localized) place where they live as a defensive reaction to globalizing forces. From this individualized perspective, the successful development of a region and community depends more on the ability to attract adult return migrants or newcomers who have accumulated human and social capital elsewhere.

The ability to retain the young population or to attract new or return migrants who are at a later stage of their life course depends on the characteristics of the region as well as the characteristics of the potential migrants. With respect to the region, it is clear that remote rural areas in North-West Europe have faced a decline in employment opportunities for many decades as a result of globalization and an economic shift from primary and secondary production toward tertiary and quaternary sector production, and an increasing scaling of the economy. As a result, rural areas have become less and less attractive for young people on their way to adulthood. A net out-migration of the young population is therefore a common feature of most rural areas (Rees et al., 1996; Muilu et al., 2004; Harts, 2008; King et al., 2006).

In the most peripheral areas in North-West Europe, such as parts of the United Kingdom, Germany and the Nordic countries, the net out-migration of the young is part of a general process of rural population decline. These remote areas have endured a downward spiral of economic deterioration, population decline, vacancy and loss of community life (Stockdale, 2006). In some of these areas, an influx of older age groups, mainly the fifty-plus group, counterbalances the net out-migration of the younger ones. This process of counterurbanization has resulted in a shift from productive to consumptive (residential, recreational) functions (Champion, 1981; Marsden, 1998; Muilu et al., 2004; Jauhiainen, 2009). The most attractive of those areas are even able to attract employment in new economic sectors and to attract return migrants and newcomers from younger age groups who can work in these new economic sectors.

'Peripheral', together with its accompanying component of 'proximity', is a relative notion. The concepts of 'periphery' and 'core' do not just refer to physical or spatial characteristics. According to Lagendijk and Lorentzen (2007, p. 460), these concepts are related to "the shaping of territorial bounded spaces, along social, institutional, political and economic dimensions". In fact, the difference in power determines the difference between core and periphery. Unlike geographical distance, which can easily change with changing means of transportation and communication, the dimensions above are persistent.

In a growing number of rural areas within small urbanized countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium the out-migration of the young population is part of a national or sub-national migration system that has been termed the 'escalator' model (Fielding, 1992; Floor et al., 2006; Findlay et al., 2009). Moreover, the 'peripheral' rural areas, among them the Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands, struggle with a negative image and are unable to attract large numbers of highly educated young adults or to create new high level employment opportunities (Harts, 2008; WES, 2005).

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