

Stories about
shrinkage: an analysis
of planning narratives
in the province of
Groningen

Doo-Hwan van Gennip - s3232476

Supervisor: Dr. Christian Lamker

Socio-spatial Planning

University of Groningen, Faculty of Spatial Sciences

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Abstract

In the coming decades, the province of Groningen will likely continue experiencing a polarisation between 'Stad' and 'Ommeland'. While the city of Groningen can expect continued growth of the economy and population, the northern and eastern parts of the province of Groningen are projected to continue to undergo a process of shrinkage. This development raises certain challenges to spatial planning in these areas and will require new ways of thinking. At the same time, current growth-oriented planning strategies are coming under increased criticism especially in shrinking contexts. This thesis used the concept of storytelling in planning to explore the narratives that are told about shrinkage by two shrinking municipalities (Delfzijl and Stadskanaal) and the provincial government of Groningen. With the help of interviews and an analysis of policy documents, the underlying policies, frames and goals of current shrinkage policies were analysed in relation to the growth and post-growth paradigms. Results suggest that traditional forms of growth are no longer the main goal of planning efforts and that a new 'liveability' narrative has emerged. However, aspects of this narrative can be questioned in relation to their full departure from growth-oriented planning and a further concretisation of the new narrative might be needed to prevent it from being diluted by competing growth-oriented narratives.

Key words: Shrinkage, peripheralisation, post-growth paradigm, regional planning, storytelling

Acknowledgements

Over the past decade, the divide between rural and urban areas has become increasingly apparent. Many people in rural and/or shrinking areas feel increasingly left out and left behind. It is my strong belief that planners have an active role to play in showing these people that their interests are as important as the interests of those who live in growing cities. This thesis has, therefore, explored narratives about shrinkage in the province of Groningen in order to make a contribution to this debate and to the futures of shrinking areas.

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List of abbreviations:

| | |
|-------|--|
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| NIMBY | Not-In-My-Back-Yard |
| WW2 | Second World War |
| RWLP | Regional Housing and Liveability Plan (Dutch: Regionaal Woon- en Leefbaarheidsplan) |
| IIP | Integral Investment Programme (Dutch: Integraal Investeringsprogramma) |
| MFC | Multifunctional community centre (Dutch: Multi-functioneel Centrum) |

Editor's note:

The names 'Groningen', 'Delfzijl' and 'Stadskanaal' are used throughout this document and can at different times refer to the municipality or province as a whole, the respective town or city or the provincial or municipal government. In order to prevent confusion as much as possible, the names have generally been accompanied by an in-text specification where the context does not give enough clarity.

Word count: 21825

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The province of Groningen, one of the three northern provinces in the Netherlands, increasingly represents a tale of two regions. A story about the 'Stad' (city) and a story about the 'Ommeland' (surrounding countryside). The story about the city of Groningen (Stad) is a story about growth and dynamism. As a result of a large and growing student population (RTV Noord, 2020) the city and municipality of Groningen currently have one of the youngest populations in the whole of the Netherlands. Furthermore, the city has also seen a broader growth of its population in recent years (Te Riele et al., 2019). However, this population growth has also raised certain challenges, such as resolving housing shortages that will likely persist (Stadszaken, 2019), with the city's population projected to increase further throughout the decade (Te Riele et al., 2019). This expansion of the city subsequently also raises the challenge of how to facilitate a sustainable and inclusive expansion of the city.

In contrast, only a few kilometres outside the city a completely different tale is unfolding. The story for several municipalities in the 'Ommeland' is one of shrinkage and decline. These municipalities are dealing with population ageing and decline and these trends are projected to continue in the next decades (Te Riele et al., 2019). Two parts of the province are hit especially hard by these developments: the Eemsdelta region in the north and East-Groningen. Municipalities in these areas are compelled to demolish parts of their housing stocks in order to prevent them from becoming vacated permanently and dilapidated (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2019). Furthermore, these municipalities are facing challenges in relation to the provision of health care and other public services. In order to address these challenges municipalities have started formulating plans and policies in collaboration with the provincial government. However, the Court of Auditors of the three northern provinces published a report in 2015 which argued that current policies in relation to shrinkage are faltering due to a lack of cooperation and vision (Noordelijke Rekenkamer, 2015).

In light of the above, it could well be argued that the province of Groningen is a microcosm of socio-spatial developments in Europe as a whole. Multiple scholars have written about a process of socio-spatial polarisation that is occurring between the continents' core and non-core regions (e.g. Kinossian, 2017; Lang & Görmar, 2019). While cities like Berlin, London and Amsterdam are growing, regions like Saxony, Yorkshire and Groningen are falling behind. This growing social divide makes it all the more important to understand why these processes are unfolding and how they might be addressed.

1.2 Research problem

This continuing process of socio-spatial polarisation is strongly related to debates about shrinkage and peripheralisation and how to plan in these contexts. Kühn (2015) has argued that as a result of continued socio-spatial polarisation between core and non-core regions the interest in peripheral and shrinking areas has increased. The concept of shrinkage has proven to be difficult to definitively define, since the causes and the manifestations of the phenomenon depend heavily on the urban or regional context (Haase et al., 2013; Pallagst et al., 2014). In general, a large amount of focus is put on the economic and demographic manifestations of shrinkage like population decline and economic stagnation. However, Lang (2012) has argued that a more process-oriented and relational approach should be considered as well in order to help understand shrinkage in the context of broader societal processes, such as, broad paradigm changes (e.g. Galland, 2012). As a result of shrinkage, cities and regions often have to deal with an array of challenges varying from adapting an oversized infrastructure and the support of local amenities to deficits in planning personnel (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2015; Sysner, 2020). In order to address these challenges planners and policy-makers have formulated a broad variety of policies (Hummel, 2015; Heeringa, 2020). With these policies planners in some cases aim to

reverse shrinkage through expansion, while in others they accept shrinkage and try to maintain the current situation.

The abovementioned studies on shrinkage mostly constitute case-studies that have explored either the contextual factors influencing shrinkage (Haase et al., 2013), its practical consequences (Sysner, 2020) or the policies that are formulated as a response to the phenomenon (Hummel, 2015). In contrast, another vein of literature on shrinkage offers criticism of planning practice in relation to shrinkage and offers suggestions for the creation of a new shrinkage paradigm (Sousa & Pinho, 2015). The main criticism in this debate is directed at the growth-oriented nature of planning and its limits or even counter effectiveness in the context of shrinkage. In confluence with the challenge of sustainability several authors have offered new approaches to shrinkage and shrinking regions. One of these approaches is the post-growth paradigm which advocates for a broader evaluation of welfare that goes beyond pure economic growth (Lamker & Schulze-Dieckhoff, 2019). A possible way to achieve this is the use of a social constructivist approach in which the qualities of shrinking regions are re-imagined or re-framed based on an understanding of development that goes beyond classical economic growth (Leick & Lang, 2018). The idea of storytelling as a model of planning (Throgmorton, 1992; Van Hulst, 2012) could help in formulating such new narratives in relation to shrinkage. According to this view, the core of what planners do is to tell stories in which past, present and future are put together to form a coherent whole. This makes the concept of 'storytelling' a valuable tool to dissect the frames and ideas that underlie current shrinkage strategies and policies and to frame the qualities of shrinking regions and the concept of 'growth' differently.

The aim of this thesis was to explore shrinkage and the associated planning stories in the province of Groningen and to analyse their underlying frames and goals in relation to the growth and post-growth paradigms. This allowed current shrinkage policies to be analysed on a more abstract level and to locate them in their local socio-spatial context. The central research question of this thesis was, therefore, as follows:

How are planning stories about shrinkage in the province of Groningen framed in relation to the growth and post-growth paradigms?

To guide the answering of this main question a number of supporting research question were formulated:

- How can the concepts of shrinkage, regional planning, framing, storytelling and the growth paradigm be theoretically grounded?
- How can planning from a post-growth perspective be theoretically grounded?
- Which demographic, spatial and service-related developments characterise shrinkage in the province of Groningen?
- What stories are told about shrinkage in the province of Groningen in policy documents and by municipal and provincial policy-makers?
- Which goals, policies and forms of cooperation underlie the local and provincial planning stories told about shrinkage in the province of Groningen?

These questions were formulated to contribute to the inventory of case-studies of shrinking cities and regions in Europe and to add to the theoretical debate on the continued prevalence and validity of growth-oriented planning, specifically in the context of shrinkage. On a more practical level, this thesis offers a critical analysis of the policies and stories deployed in relation to shrinkage in the province of Groningen. It might consequently make a modest contribution to the formulation of new policies and stories in relation to shrinkage in other regions in the Netherlands.

1.3 Thesis outline

The following chapter elaborates on theories and research about shrinkage and the responses to it. This is, among other ways, done by discussing the criticism of the growth- paradigm and alternative approaches to planning for shrinkage. At the end of the chapter, the role of storytelling in planning is discussed. Chapter 3 will explain this thesis' research methods and grounds these in a theoretical and ethical perspective. In Chapter 4, the developments underlying shrinkage in the province of Groningen are presented first, followed by an explanation and analysis of the stories that are told by the municipalities and the province. Chapter 5 critically discusses the planning stories told in Groningen to be followed by concluding arguments about this study's implications for planning theory and practice in Chapter 6. Finally, Chapter 7 offers a reflection on the presented results and the research process.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Shrinkage and peripheralisation

In recent years, the issue of (urban) shrinkage has gained increased prominence in the field of planning. However, the concept's theoretical multiplicity has in practice led to difficulties in researching it as a uniform phenomenon (Pallagst et al., 2014). Based on a comparative study of European cities Haase et al. (2013) have argued that the manifestations of shrinkage vary across space. In each of the ten cities they analysed shrinkage was driven by a different combination of factors, which led to different manifestations and degrees of shrinkage. Hence, they have argued that more context-aware theoretical and empirical approaches are needed to better understand the phenomenon. Nevertheless, some general aspects of shrinkage have been identified by the literature. Economic stagnation and demographic developments are generally considered to be the two key elements constituting shrinkage. The former is often associated with deindustrialisation and lower economic competitiveness while the latter generally manifests itself in the form of falling birth rates, selective out-migration of younger age groups and the subsequent ageing of the local population (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015).

Lang (2012) has criticised the above way of conceptualising shrinkage. Although, he acknowledges that demographic decline and lack of economic competitiveness are relevant in relation to shrinkage, he believes that this way of discussing shrinkage is too narrow. In Lang's opinion, it leads to a discussion of the manifestations of shrinkage that fails to discuss these in relation to broader processes. He, therefore, advocates for a conceptualisation in which shrinkage is seen as a process of peripheralisation. This position considers shrinking and growing places to be a result of relational positions and societal processes rather than the structural characteristics of places. If one follows Lang's (2012) argument it debatably has two implications for planning for shrinkage. First, it puts planners in the driving seat. Shrinkage is, at least in part, a result of the active intervention of planners, who in many ways have supported the societal processes that have led to peripheralisation (e.g. investing mainly in prosperous urban areas or inter-urban transport). The second implication lies in the fact that the peripheralisation of one place cannot be seen as separate from the centralisation of other places (Beetz, 2008; Lang, 2012) and that these processes are initiated and reinforced by planners and the planned. In practice, this might mean that successfully addressing issues of shrinkage would also require involving growing areas in the discussion and critically assessing their progress in relation to shrinkage.

The multidimensionality of concepts like shrinkage and peripheralisation warrants a further discussion of their meanings. Kühn (2015) posits that a distinction between periphery and peripheralisation should be made. The term 'periphery' he argues is very much focused on location and distance to which social implications are then attributed. Dühr (2009) has argued that peripherality has traditionally been associated with remoteness, low accessibility and relatively weak economic performance. However, this static interpretation of the concept fails to address the dynamic production of peripheral locations as a result of social and economic processes. Hence, the concept of peripheralisation is needed to more comprehensively discuss shrinkage. Kühn (2015) has identified economic, social and political explanations of peripheralisation, that each take their departure from the characteristics of peripheral areas (e.g. an economically weak position). However, these explanations also emphasise the processes that produce the process of peripheralisation, which Kühn, similarly to Lang (2012) argues is a key aspect of a better multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon.

In addition to the abovementioned structural and process-oriented conceptualisations of shrinkage, there is a third conceptualisation of shrinkage that revolves around language and the image of a place. Meyer & Miggelbrink (2013) have posited that positive or negative images and lingual symbols have a not-to-be-overlooked influence on the peripheralisation of places and that these images are reproduced through a so-called looping effect. In the Netherlands this discursive form of shrinkage is, for instance, expressed in the alternative names for the urban west of the country, called the 'Randstad', and the rural east dubbed the 'Randland' by Meier et al. (2015). The process of discursive peripheralisation has also been closely associated with territorial

stigmatisation. Wacquant et al. (2014) have given an empirical overview of the reproduction and stickiness of territorial stigmas in various metropolitan areas and have argued that these symbols have serious consequences for those people who live in these urban areas. Yet despite the negative impacts discursive symbols can have on places, it has also been argued that they can provide peripheral areas with opportunities to act and manoeuvre (Meyer & Miggelbrink, 2013). With regard to this manoeuvring space, Bürk et al. (2012) have identified a distinction between attempts to reverse the stigma and attempts to embrace it. The first strategy tries to prove the stigma wrong and can, for example, involve place rebranding. The second strategy involves confirming the stigma in hope of external help. This strategy has also been called strategic self-peripheralisation. Plüschke-Altöf (2019) has argued that for peripheral rural areas the choice between fighting or confirming the discursive image of peripherality might in the end come down to the desire to take or abdicate responsibilities.

In relation to the discussion of images in relation to shrinkage and peripheralisation, it, finally, seems relevant to take a closer look at the connotations concepts like 'peripheral' and 'shrinkage' have. As noted earlier, peripheries are normally strongly associated with underdevelopment and geographic remoteness and in the field of planning the concept of shrinkage generally has a negative connotation often being equalled to an unwelcome disease (Sousa & Pinho, 2015). However, this perception of shrinkage does not necessarily seem to be representative of all sentiments. Tewdwr-Jones (2003) has argued that residents of peripheral areas also experience and identify positive aspects of peripherality. Such aspects are often related to the quality of the natural environment and the relatively low costs of living. A comparative analysis of happiness levels in German cities seems to reinforce this finding. The study found that on average people residing in shrinking cities do not experience less life-satisfaction than their counterparts from growing cities, although a selection bias should reasonably be taken into account (Delken, 2008). These positive interpretations form an important addition to the meanings associated with peripherality and may well be valuable in reframing shrinkage and shrinking regions. Additionally, Dühr (2009) has reasoned that peripherality is a matter of context and scale. In her discussion of whether there are peripheral regions in the Netherlands she argues that it strongly depends on the scale at which you are talking. On a national scale, the three northern provinces of the Netherlands can certainly be considered peripheral when compared to the urban areas in the Randstad. However, if one zooms out to the European scale the three northern provinces are not half as inaccessible or underdeveloped as they are perceived to be within their national context. In this sense, regions and places seem to be able to simultaneously experience different degrees of peripherality, depending on what scale or context one uses as the point of reference. Here, the importance of relationality and scale in discussions of shrinkage, as underlined by Lang (2012) and Kühn (2015), seems to be further supported. Shrinkage should be viewed in relation to other places and should not be seen as a naturally occurring spatial characteristic of specific areas.

2.2 Consequences of shrinkage

With regard to the impacts of shrinkage, the literature has identified a range of different consequences. The effects of shrinkage on space and planning can generally be sorted in three main categories: service-related, spatial-developmental and administrative effects. In the following paragraphs each of these three categories will briefly be discussed.

First, the provision of welfare services and other amenities. In shrinking areas, public sector services, as well as commercial services, come under increased strain due to a decline in the regional or local tax and customer base (Hollander, 2018; Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2015), requiring local authorities to cut services in areas or increase tax rates to balance the books (Syssner, 2020; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). In her case-studies of Swedish municipalities, Syssner (2020) finds that cultural and leisure services, like swimming pools and theatres, are often the first ones to be cut in the context of depopulation. Additionally, municipalities often make decisions to centralise (health)care services, merge schools or in the most extreme case close the latter. While Syssner does not elaborate on the social effects of these decisions, research has been

conducted on the effects on events like school closures and it at the least negatively affects local perceptions of a place (e.g. Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). Although the Dutch context differs from the Swedish context, shrinking municipalities in the Netherlands seem to experience similar challenges in relation to welfare provision. Local schools have been closed, spending cuts have been made and the situation for many of these municipalities has, arguably, worsened as a result of recent devolutions of tasks in youth services and elderly care (Rijksoverheid, 2020). Of course, it might be argued that, in general, spatial planners have little to do with social service provision. However, processes like school closures, the centralisation of health care services or the closure of a local swimming pool all have spatial implications, as will be discussed in the following paragraph, making a discussion of the effects of shrinkage on welfare provision worthwhile.

Shrinkage also has consequences for planning and development. In this case, the economic stagnation and demographic decline impact (infra)structural aspects. An oversized road network or a high number of housing vacancies are good examples of these spatial effects of shrinkage (Sousa & Pinho, 2015; Hollander, 2018). Additionally, the economic stagnation and subsequent lack of demand for property lead to a decline in the amount of resources available to maintain buildings in good shape (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2015). This might, in turn, compound the declining demand for property, as a result of further physical deterioration of dwellings and retail spaces. Based on their interviews with local planning officials Syssner & Olausson (2015) found that planners in shrinking areas feel that they are increasingly the sole spatial developers in their regions or municipalities due to the absence of private sector actors. This development has, in turn, often further increased the financial burden on municipalities, since local authorities now bear the brunt of the burden for spatial development (Syssner, 2020).

Another set of practical consequences of shrinkage has been identified in relation to the administrative organisation of municipalities (Syssner & Olausson, 2015; Syssner, 2020). First, administrators and planners find that there are very little resources to develop strategic policies. Second, despite a shrinking population many basic administrative tasks and services still need to be delivered, leading to relatively large overhead costs to continue them. Third, civil servants in small or shrinking municipalities are generally required to manage multiple portfolios, which might potentially lead to a lack of specialist knowledge. One should be careful to generalise the findings of a Swedish case-study to other contexts, but in the Netherlands similar organisational concerns have emerged, which has led to an administrative reorganisation. One of the main justifications for these reorganisations has been that in order to maintain acceptable service levels in the future, municipalities in Groningen will need to pool resources (Provincie Groningen, 2020a). This third category of implications is again little spatially oriented. However, the effects of shrinkage on the organisation of local governments deserves attention. Pojani & Stead (2014) have argued that policy and planning decisions are determined by the interplay of interests, institutions and ideas. Hence, organisational changes in shrinking areas will affect the institutions and the ideas that are present and by extension affect local policies and plans.

2.3 The limits of growth

Before discussing the ways in which planning practice and theory have tried to address and deal with shrinkage and its effects, it seems relevant to provide insight into the ongoing debate about the role of (economic) growth in the general field of planning. A topic that has also come to increasingly underlie discussions about planning for both urban and regional shrinkage.

Since the beginning of modern urban planning growth has always played a large role. The assumption of most planners has always been that one should anticipate and accommodate growth. The ideas of Le Corbusier and Ebenezer Howard are responses formulated to address the problems associated with urban growth, while ideas like the growth pole theory are specifically meant to spur growth in non-urban regions. Barry (2019) has argued that growth formed the basis of post-WW2 rebuilding efforts across Europe. However, since the 1980's planners have become increasingly focussed on growth in and of itself (Rydin, 2013; Boland, 2014). While ideas like the Radiant City also had a social dimension, most planning interventions today are implemented with the sole aim of generating more economic growth and competition. The

reasoning behind this narrow focus on growth is built around what Barry (2019) calls an 'Achilles lance' argumentation. The proposition of this argument is that although growth has detrimental effects, its benefits can be used to (partly) remedy the wounds it inflicts on, for instance, the environment. However, as Barry (2019) notes, this kind of argument does not tell us anything about the distribution of the benefits of growth or whether these 'compensations' are enough to undo the damage of growth. Boland (2014) has similarly criticised the dominant role economic competitiveness and growth play in contemporary spatial planning. Based on his case-study in Northern-Ireland he concludes that planning is increasingly becoming an attachment to the market and that the public good has become more and more subservient to the needs and desires of the market. Galland (2012) has likewise remarked that the Danish planning system has steadily moved from steering spatial developments to facilitating economic growth. In relation to regional planning, Bristow (2011) has offered a strong criticism of the dominance the competitiveness and growth paradigm has obtained. She argues that the rationale of competition cannot be translated into reasonable planning policy and that doing so has led to damaging place-competition. This critique, to some extent, touches upon Lang's (2012) proposition that shrinkage should be seen as a relational process. In the current growth-oriented planning paradigm competition can, arguably, be considered the bedrock of this relational process.

In response to these criticisms, two new schools of thought have emerged: degrowth and post-growth thinking. The first is more radical in its propositions and advocates for a complete departure from growth-oriented thinking, while post-growth thinking takes on a more moderate position as will also be shown later. It primarily attempts to formulate alternative development paths that can co-exist with the growth-dependent development path. The main pillars of the degrowth paradigm are twofold. First, the assumption that economic growth will lead to greater social equality and environmental sustainability is considered faulty. Here, degrowth scholars refer to ceiling and rebound effects (Kallis, 2018). The first argues that there is a ceiling to the extent to which growth generates more general welfare. The rebound effect argument posits that greater efficiency might in some cases lead to higher rather than lower consumption of resources. The second proposition of degrowth scholarship is that attention should be redirected from GDP growth towards ecological sustainability and social justice. In practice, this translates into the desire to lower global consumption and production. One of the scholars who has popularised this notion is Kate Raworth (2017). She argues that society should aim to get into the safe space in between the social floor and the environmental ceiling. The de-growth paradigm has also gained traction in the field of planning with scholars like Barry (2019) and Ferreira & Von Schönfeld (2020) advocating for a reorientation of planning toward degrowth thinking.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that reverting from the growth paradigm has proven to be difficult. In fact, the continued focus of planners on growth can be well-explained by looking at path-dependency and current funding structures in most planning systems. Van Assche et al. (2014) have argued that within governance structures the decisions one can or will make are limited by the path that was chosen in previous decisions. Planners often become so invested in a certain way of thinking that it is very difficult for them to adapt to changing circumstances and reformulate plans and strategies. The persistence of growth-thinking in planning practice has also come forward in an analysis of Leipzig's narratives of shrinkage (Mace & Volgmann, 2017). Although, new non-growth storylines were construed and popularised around themes such as liveability and heritage, local government departments still engaged in actions aimed at growth and competition like competing for a BMW car plant. This kind of policy also touches upon the financial benefits of growth for governments. Local authorities often earn money by selling off land, which in turn incentivises growth policies (Wiechmann, 2008). Furthermore, Galland (2012) has argued that with the rise of neoliberalism in planning, a Danish regional planning system has emerged that invests mainly in the making specific regions more competitive, thereby rewarding the places that are growing and further incentivising growth policies.

2.4 Planning for shrinkage

Planning for shrinkage is still a relatively new phenomenon, but recently interest in the topic as well as the amount of literature on it has increased (Hollander et al., 2009). This increase in interest has coincided with the process of realisation among planners that in some regions shrinkage is not simply a temporary phenomenon (Elzerman & Bontje, 2015). Farke (2005) has argued that, although this process of realisation is often difficult, perceptions of shrinkage do generally evolve. At first, politicians and planners will indeed argue that local shrinkage is only temporal, but as time progresses most will eventually first acknowledge the structural nature of shrinkage and then slowly come to accept it as a reality. Once the reality of shrinkage has been accepted, planners start to formulate ways to plan their shrinking spaces and regions. However, discussions about which methods for planning shrinkage are the most effective are still under way. Elzerman & Bontje (2015) have argued that due to the different causes and effects of shrinkage in each place, no general formula to deal with shrinkage can realistically be formulated. The key individual factors to take into account are, according to them; the current expected pace and scope of shrinkage, the quality and quantity of the housing stock, local economic structures and expected changes in demand for social and public services. Additionally, they argue that insight into the socio-cultural fabric of regions can help in tailoring shrinkage strategies.

Despite the unique nature of shrinkage processes from place to place, conceptual categorisations of shrinkage strategies have been made. Danielzyk et al. (2002) have identified four different strategies to deal with shrinkage: 'decline as a vicious circle', 'expansive strategy', 'maintenance strategy' and 'planning for decline'. The latter three strategies are active strategies that either attempt to reverse, cope with or utilise the shrinkage that is occurring. The 'decline as a vicious circle' strategy is based on a certain resignation and involves the hope for external help from other government layers or actors. Hospers (2014) has identified four largely similar strategies, although some small differences in assumptions and semantics ought to be discussed. The strategies Hospers has identified are: trivialising, countering, accepting and utilising. Although, Hospers has identified these strategies mainly with regard to urban shrinkage, they could also well be applied to categorise approaches to shrinkage rural areas. The four strategies can be characterised as follows:

- **Trivialising:** Local policy-makers do not consider shrinkage to be of serious importance and continue their current spatial development methods. The difference with the passive strategy identified by Danielzyk et al (2002) is that this strategy does not explicitly mention the hope for external help.
- **Countering:** Policy-makers aim to foster (renewed) growth of their city or region by attracting new inhabitants and entrepreneurs. Concrete examples of these strategies are property development, investments in infrastructure and place-marketing.
- **Accepting:** Policy makers accept that their region or city is shrinking and start directing their attention to policy measures that will mitigate the negative consequences. Efforts aimed at revitalising village or housing stock demolition are examples of policies used under this strategy. The name of this strategy is arguably confusing, considering that countering and utilising strategies also 'accept' shrinkage, but deal with it differently.
- **Utilising:** Probably the most ambitious strategy of the four. Policy-makers and planners do not aim to simply mitigate the effects of shrinkage, but instead try to find specific ways in which the situation can be used to the benefit of the shrinking city or region.

In relation to these conceptual shrinkage strategies, Pallagst et al. (2017) have observed that it is not necessarily possible, or perhaps even reasonable, to separate these identified strategies from the different perceptions of shrinkage that planners can have. Hence, they combined the categorisations of Danielzyk et al. (2002) and Farke (2005) to show that the perceptions of shrinkage to a very large extent inspire the choice of strategy to actually deal with the issue. According to their model, a perception of ignoring can, for instance, form the basis of choosing the 'decline as a vicious circle' strategy as well as an expansive strategy. This interrelation between perceptions and chosen strategies allows one to better understand why passivity should also be

considered a strategy on its own. One could very well make the argument that trivialising is hardly a real strategy to deal with shrinkage, since it simply continues current planning practice. However, Pallagst et al.'s model (2017) shows how this strategy comes about and how it can be based on different perceptions. Consequently, this interrelation makes it clear that trivialising is more than a simple continuation of planning and that it can be a conscious strategy to deal with shrinkage.

In addition to these conceptual shrinkage strategies, the literature has produced a range of case-studies that discuss concrete policies that aim to address shrinkage or its side-effects. Hummel (2015) has argued that in response to shrinkage a right-sizing paradigm has emerged. This paradigm consists of four distinct strategies. The community development strategy focuses on the economy and is exemplified by interventions involving culture, innovation or knowledge (e.g. Reidolf, 2016; Brown et al., 2004). The democratic and administrative strategies focus on civic engagement and governmental organisation respectively and often translate into governmental attempts to facilitate civic self-organisation or redefine governmental responsibilities (e.g. Hollander & Cahill, 2011). These three strategies will be the focus of the first part of this section. The second section will concentrate on interventions in the built environment.

Panagopoulos & Barreira (2012) have made a systematic overview of the most common interventions made by Portuguese municipalities to deal with shrinkage. These attempts can best be described as a mix of countering and accepting strategies. Attempts to reverse shrinkage took the form of promoting marriage and attracting students, while interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of shrinkage translated into attempts to maintain health-care service levels and the generation of employment. The latter strategy could at the surface also be seen as an attempt at countering shrinkage, but municipalities used this policy to control the outflow of current households rather than attracting new ones. In the Spanish Asturias region a similar blend of shrinkage strategies has been deployed (Heeringa, 2020). Attempts by the region's main cities to maintain the attractiveness of their inner cities have been complemented by expansive housing strategies in the municipalities at the urban periphery and the coast. The maintenance policies that have been implemented in Portuguese municipalities and Asturias arguably fall in the broader current of smart shrinkage strategies. Popper & Popper (2002) argue that smart decline strategies should focus on who and what remains in the area and build upon this inventory to maintain and improve the quality of life for those remaining residents.

Hollander & Nemeth (2011) have criticised these smart decline strategies on three accounts; their top-down nature, their assumption of having a tabula rasa and their need for an acquiescing public. The two cases-studies discussed above offer differing degrees of support for each of these criticisms. With regard to the criticism of paternalism, one of the two studies offers a contrasting observation. Panagopoulos & Barreira (2012) have attributed the apparent failure of Portuguese municipalities to implement effective shrinkage policies to the lack of national and regional coordination in this area. In other words, they suggest that more top-down steering might be needed. This argument does not completely refute the criticism put forward by Hollander & Nemeth, but it might suggest that down the line a balance should be found between paternalism and the grass-roots. As for the tabula rasa criticism, Heeringa's (2020) case-study offers some support for this critique. First, in Asturias the value attached to independence by residents and local government councils has, arguably, made it more difficult to achieve effective regional coordination and implementation of shrinkage policies. This seems to support the notion that in practice a blank slate does not exist and that local attitudes and interests matter.

Hollander & Nemeth's (2011) third criticism provides a good point of departure for a discussion of attempts to increase civic engagement and participation and the merits of these actions in relation to shrinkage. Hospers (2014) has argued that it has several benefits. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, shrinkage generally has negative consequences for local fiscality and policy-making resources (Syssner, 2020). Increasing civic engagement can mitigate these problems, as it allows for a better identification and use of local knowledge, while it also delegates a number of tasks (i.e. costs) to citizens. Furthermore, this increased empowerment can potentially enhance a community's social capital and quality of life (Specht, 2013) and perhaps reduce the pessimism sometimes found among actors in shrinking regions

(e.g. Heeringa, 2020). Although, the benefits of increased civic engagement are ample, Hospers (2014) has also identified two conditions for engagement to actually have a positive impact. These requirements are a clear (re)assignment of tasks and responsibilities between government, market and civil society and active governmental engagement in helping citizens to organise themselves or deliver services.

One of the most instinctive manifestations of the spatial consequences of shrinkage is the problem of an oversized (housing) infrastructure. Attempts to adapt the housing stock (or other infrastructure) to the reality of shrinkage can be categorised as a maintenance strategy, but these efforts are strongly context-dependent and therefore take on different forms. Hummel (2015) has argued that right-sizing efforts in the built-environment generally translate into five different types of interventions:

- **Land banking:** An organisation or government actively buys up vacant plots and dwellings and then redevelops and sells them.
- **Rehabilitation:** The government attempts to rehabilitate vacant dwellings that have not dilapidated beyond repair in order to revitalise certain neighbourhoods.
- **Demolition:** This strategy involves taking dwellings out of the housing stock in order to balance housing demand and supply, while the vacant plots might be reassigned.
- **(Urban) greening:** A strategy that aims to give vacant plots a new purpose and thereby fill up the holes that have emerged in the (urban) infrastructure.
- **Consolidation:** The government promotes an increase in density in specific areas, thereby making the overall housing infrastructure more compact and reducing costs.

In the Netherlands, the projected increase in single-person households and the absence of a severe oversupply of housing, as has been observed for instance in East Germany, has necessitated a policy approach that goes beyond simple demolition. Instead, Dutch municipalities have adopted a policy that aims not at downsizing but at adapting their housing infrastructure so as to make it future-proof. This has in practice translated into selective demolition and a focused (re)building of dwellings that better cater to the already present ageing and shrinking households (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). Hoekstra et al. (2020) have recently observed the seemingly contradictory nature of the Dutch shrinkage policies with regard to housing in Parkstad Limburg, since between 2004 and 2015 more dwellings were actually being built than were demolished. Moreover, the authors have criticised the financial burden on local authorities and overall merits of these elective demolitions. They argue that in practice it have mostly been low-cost rental dwellings that have been demolished, even though demand for low-income housing has increased in the region. Such an observation naturally raises questions in relation to the aim of maintenance strategies of trying to preserve a good quality of live for those who choose to remain in the region.

2.4.1 Post-growth planning for shrinkage

As noted earlier, the role of growth in planning has come under increased criticism (e.g. Rydin, 2013; Barry, 2019) and this criticism of growth-directedness has also been applied to planning for shrinkage. Sousa & Pinho (2015) have discussed the seemingly paradoxical nature of planning for shrinkage and the negative connotations the concept still has in the field of planning. They argue, however, that shrinkage is not per definition paradoxical to planning. Instead, new ways to effectively plan for shrinkage need to be developed, approaches which can form feasible alternatives to the dominant growth paradigm of planning theory and practice. Still, the inclination to focus on growth is partly reflected in the conceptual categorisations of shrinkage strategies discussed above. The countering and expansive strategies both aim to reverse shrinkage, with the eventual hope of re-achieving growth (Danielzyk et al., 2002; Hospers, 2014). Sousa & Pinho (2015) have called these strategies, reaction strategies, and mention a focus on cultural assets or knowledge to be the most common examples of these growth-oriented approaches. Furthermore, the often proposed solution of increasing the connectivity of shrinking regions through investments in infrastructure is similarly based on the belief that growth should

be re-achieved, as it is assumed that this will open the up area to investment (Von Schönfeld et al., 2018). The problem with these strategies is that they all try to address shrinkage by implementing policies that are effectively aimed at growth. Many of them have proven to be ineffective in actually dealing with shrinkage and in a worst case scenario can even become counterproductive (Elzerman & Bontje, 2015). Several scholars have therefore argued that a new vocabulary (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2015) or a Plan B (Syssner, 2020) is needed to plan for shrinkage. This is the area where post-growth thinking has offered an interesting new perspective.

Recently, a number of publications have put forward ideas that reorient planning in shrinking rural areas towards goals that go beyond growth. Leick & Lang (2018) have argued that social-constructivism might offer a way for rural and shrinking regions to redefine themselves in relation to growing urban areas. They argue that a social constructivist approach has the benefit of being better able to capture and refocus our understanding of the qualities of, what they call, non-core regions. These qualities generally refer to concepts that are more difficult to measure in numerical terms, like the social economy or quality of life. Dax & Fischer (2018) have similarly argued that a broad reorientation of the way in which the success of shrinking places and regions is assessed, is needed. They call for social innovations that allow for policy assessments that are based more on the qualitative and social aspects of life. These innovations can include a broader valuation of labour, a stronger emphasis on the importance of social capital and a reorientation of spatial functions from production to leisure and living.

A further discussion of the reframing of the position of shrinking rural areas seems to make it relevant to refer to the earlier observation that peripheries are not exclusively perceived negatively by public (Tewdwr-Jones, 2003). Knudsen (2018) has argued that despite the centralisation of the Norwegian population in urban centres, rural areas retain a high symbolic value among the broader public and receive a lot of attention from policy-makers. In order to explain this appreciation of rurality, Knudsen uses the notion of vicariousness. Vicariousness refers to the phenomenon of a minority performing certain tasks in name of the majority and with the clear approval of that majority (e.g. Davie, 2007). In practice, the concept of vicariousness could be used to reframe the role peripheral rural areas are assigned. Instead of being considered problematic areas that weigh down the national interest, peripheral could be re-evaluated as areas that preserve and enhance the positive qualities of rural life in service of the majority and for which they deserve support. Furthermore, the notion of vicarious habitation has the potential to reframe rural and peripheral areas as places where producing economic value is no longer the main focus of planning. Although each of these social constructivist approaches might have their benefits, Plüschke-Altöf & Grootens (2019) have also criticised them for their tendency to put a large emphasis on local agency. They argue that positively reconstructing images of the periphery potentially puts a lot, perhaps even too much, responsibility in the hands of local actors, while it might also lead to an over-idealisation of the qualities of the rural or peripheral locality.

2.4.2 Dutch regional planning and planning for shrinkage

In the post-WW2 period of economic expansion, the Dutch government started to acknowledge the existence of a urban-rural dichotomy between the Randstad area in the west and the rural areas in the north as well as the east and south of the country. Importantly, the northern provinces were able to tweak and use these frames of urban-rural differences and northern underdevelopment to encourage national government intervention (Molema, 2012). In order to counter the urban-rural polarisation, traditional policy instruments, like investments in infrastructure and industry (Dühr, 2009) were scaled up and a spreading policy of government services and education facilities was conceived with the aim of bringing employment and development to the peripheral regions of the country (Dühr, 2009; Molema, 2012). In the 1980's, these policies were largely revoked. The idea of spreading employment and wealth across the country was replaced by the idea that regions should be self-reliant and that national efficiency should be achieved. In this framework, regions were told to focus on maximising their own strengths with investments in urban areas being seen as more effective in generating national wealth (Oosterhaven, 1996; Molema, 2012).

The abovementioned changes with regard to the Dutch planning policy can be placed in the broader paradigmatic shift that has occurred in European countries over the past thirty to forty years (see Galland, 2012 for an overview of developments in Denmark). The idea of a malleable society that dominated Dutch policy and planning in the first thirty years after WW2, has increasingly been abandoned in response to deindustrialisation and a yearning for government efficiency. In the 1980's The Dutch government had to make large spending cuts and wanted to do away with government activities they deemed as either inefficient or superfluous. The market was seen as the best way to get out of the economic slump and the government was relegated to a more facilitative role. In relation to these developments, an important nuance should be made about for Netherlands. The Dutch government still plays a relatively large role in planning matters and in softening regional inequalities through redistribution measures (Musterd & Nijman, 2016), when compared to Anglo-Saxon planning system. Hence, in this sense the abovementioned developments should be seen as a relative change.

Considering these policy-related and institutional changes, it is important to acknowledge three key differences between the situation in the 1950's and the current situation. In both cases the issues of economic and demographic decline lie at the heart of the issue, but if one takes a closer look, the points of departure are quite different. Currently the problems the province of Groningen is facing are framed from the perspective of shrinkage, while in the 1950's they were framed from a perspective of underdevelopment. Furthermore, the differences between the city of Groningen and other parts of the province have grown, with opposite developments occurring simultaneously (Te Riele et al., 2019). Finally, the overarching planning framework is based on a fundamentally different ideology, which in the present situation means that new planning ideas about shrinkage need to be advocated for more extensively and have mostly been formulated on the provincial and municipal levels. In recent years Dutch planning strategies with regard to shrinkage have evolved from trivialising and countering approaches towards more accepting and utilising approaches, using the terminology coined by Hospers (2014). However, this turn is still quite recent. It has even been argued that the Dutch government was relatively late in realising the seriousness of shrinkage. The demographic report written by Derks et al. (2006) is considered a key document in the process of realisation. Haartsen & Venhorst (2010) have argued that the report's population models gave extreme outcomes and that even in more realistic projections population decline in the Netherlands will be relatively modest compared to other European areas. Nevertheless, the Derks report and other population projections have put shrinkage on the agenda (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010; Elzerman & Bontje, 2015). The national government first set out a shrinkage strategy in 2009. This strategy acknowledged a need to accept shrinkage and delegated most responsibilities for coping with it to local and provincial governments (Elzerman & Bontje, 2015). It might perhaps be argued that this hands-off approach of the national government, has made the 'decline as a vicious circle' strategy, as identified by Danielzyk et al. (2002), increasingly unfeasible for Dutch municipalities since assistance is likely not to come.

On the municipal level, Haartsen (2008) found that policy-makers from Dutch municipalities that experienced decline in the 2000's or earlier, were still in a state of denial and even in engaged in NIMBY-ism. They would argue that shrinkage was a problem that only their neighbours had to contend with, thereby essentially trivialising the issue. A second type of response found by Haartsen (2008) amounted to as much as a countering strategy, with policy-makers believing they could 'solve' shrinkage by, for instance, building more houses. An interesting case to discuss here for the province of Groningen is the Blauwe Stad housing development scheme around Winschoten. The involved municipalities and the provincial government hoped that the project would boost liveability and employment in a region dealing with deindustrialisation and population decline (Dammers et al., 2004). However, the economic recession and housing market slump in the post-2008 period strongly inhibited the success of the project and ambitions have since been scaled back significantly. The Court of Auditors of the three northern provinces have concluded that the project was driven too much by political desires and too little by realistic expectations about what the project would be able to deliver (Noordelijke Rekenkamer, 2010). Although the Blauwe Stad project has never fully been finished, some of the infrastructure that was initially built is still there. This shows the potential for countering

strategies to be counterproductive. If the project fails, the manifestations of shrinkage might be exacerbated. Furthermore, recent decentralisation of social services from the national government to the local and provincial levels, has reduced the amount of financial resources Dutch municipalities have at their disposal to finance costly countering policies as a reaction to shrinkage. This comes on top of the financial strain that most shrinking municipalities often have to deal with as a result of a decreasing tax base (Syssner, 2020). As a result, increased attention is being given to accepting and utilising strategies with different government levels still very much experimenting with effective and feasible approaches (Elzerman & Bontje, 2015).

2.5 Storytelling, framing and planning

Considering the above discussion of shrinkage and planning for shrinkage, there seems to have been a steady move towards a new conceptualisation of shrinking places and regions. According to this conceptualisation, shrinking areas exist not solely because of their spatial, demographic or economic characteristics but also as a result of how planners and the general public see the development of shrinking regions in relation to other places and how they express their views through language and the application of certain characteristics to places. Hence, it could be argued that authors who have made calls for the formulation of a new vocabulary or paradigm to effectively deal with shrinkage (e.g. Sousa & Pinho, 2015; Syssner, 2020) are essentially calling for a reframing of shrinkage. Van Hulst & Yanow (2016) have identified a series of devices with which both policy issues and policies can be framed. Three of the devices they identify are selecting, naming and categorising. With these instruments policy-makers are able to accentuate the aspects of an issue they find important, while hiding from view other aspects that might have been equally relevant. Through this process of framing a specific image of the present is generated which can also outline directions for the future. However, it is only with the aid of the fourth device, storytelling, that the aspects of a frame are bound together. By plotting events and people in time and space, the framing of a problem or an issue is made explicit and is able to provide possible solutions (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). This potentially makes storytelling a valuable tool for the reframing of shrinkage and a more abstract analysis of current shrinkage policies. The remainder of this subchapter will give a brief overview of the ongoing discussions about the role storytelling plays in planning.

In his paper on storytelling in planning Van Hulst (2012) makes a distinction between storytelling as a model *of* and a model *for* planning. In the first instance, storytelling is considered a fundamental part of planning and a practice that can be used as an analytical tool to gain insight into planning realities. One of the first advocates of this view was Throgmorton (1992). Through a reconstruction of narratives that were used to advocate for the construction of a new power station in Chicago, Throgmorton attempted to show how even in very technical planning cases, planners fundamentally engage in persuasive and future-directed storytelling. More recently, Throgmorton (2007) has advocated for a stronger focus on analysing the political and physical settings in which the process of storytelling happens, rather than solely on the stories in and of themselves. A successful example of persuasive storytelling in relation to the case-study area of this thesis has been identified by Molema (2012). It should be observed first that Molema does not talk about storytelling *per se* and rather talks about frames. However, his historical approach to explain the political and planning origins of the perceived urban-rural dichotomy in the Netherlands reads, arguably, very much like a story. Furthermore, if one follows Throgmorton's (1992) argument that storytelling is fundamental to planning, then an analysis of planning narratives can serve as a way to analyse the underlying goals of specific shrinkage policies.

In contrast to the 'model *of*' current of thought, storytelling as a model *for* planning sees storytelling not just as everyday-practice but also as an inspiration for planning on how to become more democratic and inclusive. Sandercock (2003) has been the main proponent of this view and she has put forward an extensive list of ways in which stories can be used in planning. These uses range from policy and critique to serving as a catalyst of change. Next to her discussion of the different uses stories can have, Sandercock also advocates for planning to consider persuasive storytelling as an inspiration to democratise planning and help new stories to be heard. Here, it

appears relevant to make a short observation about the different positions these currents ascribe to storytelling in planning. Van Hulst (2012) has reasonably argued that Sandercock's belief in storytelling as a model *for*, does not necessarily imply that she subscribes to Throgmorton's argument that storytelling is the fundamental practice of planning. Instead, when looking at her own writing, she seems to take a more moderate position by arguing that storytelling is certainly central to planning, but that it is not the only tool at a planner's disposal (Sandercock, 2003).

Although, Van Hulst (2012) has to some degree streamlined theoretical discussions about the value of storytelling for planning with his model *of* and model *for* distinction, Bulkens et al. (2015) have argued that these two strands fail to acknowledge the value storytelling can have for the planned, rather than planners and theorists. The point they make strongly relates to broader questions about power differences and participation that regularly return in discussions on storytelling in planning (e.g. Throgmorton, 1992) and planning in general. Sandercock (2003) has argued that planners should use storytelling as a tool to overcome existing power differences in increasingly diverse societies, but she does not go much beyond a call to action. In his case-study Van Hulst (2012) briefly and indirectly addressed the issue of power differences through the identification of a 'hidden story' that was unable to penetrate into the main discussion. Bulkens et al. (2015) see the identification of these kind of normally hidden stories, construed by the planned, as the third purpose of storytelling in planning. They argue that insight into the perceptions and attachments of the planned are important if a truly inclusive planning process is the goal.

A final observation should be made in relation to the elements that constitute stories in planning. By default, stories and narratives are often mainly associated with texts and language, but in planning the role of visual metaphors in strengthening stories should not be underestimated. The added value of metaphors for planning has been discussed by several authors (e.g. Davoudi et al., 2018). Mäntysalo et al. (2020) have specifically argued that strategic planning efforts can be strengthened through persuasive storytelling that is supported by spatial imaginaries and metaphors. Based on their case-study of Aalborg, they have come to the conclusion that the imaginaries that are used should not just be flexible with regard to their interpretation. They should also be artefactually anchored. It is important to note that the latter qualification does not mean that these spatial imaginaries should hence necessarily be physical objects. However, if they are to support the storytelling and to be mobilise and activate a diverse group of stakeholders, they should be sufficiently robust and concrete. A bad example in this regard is the polycentricity metaphor that has been used in Helsinki. Here the spatial imaginary was too abstract and did not set out concrete boundaries within which actors could work towards a common goal (Granqvist et al., 2019).

2.6 Conceptual model

In view of the above theories and findings, the following conceptual model about shrinkage and planning for shrinkage can be constructed (see Figure 1 below). Shrinkage (or peripheralisation) manifests itself in a number of different ways, such as, demographic decline and an oversized spatial infrastructure. However, this manifestational view of shrinkage does not represent the whole picture. The process of shrinkage and its consequences are driven and influenced by both developments on the macro-level, like globalisation, and local socio-spatial contexts, in the form of existing physical structures and community structures. Furthermore, developments on the macro-level arguably also have an impact on the governance and policies that are formulated in response to shrinkage, which in turn have impact the process of shrinkage. Conceptually, four types of policy reactions can be distinguished. The type of reaction to shrinkage seems to depend on the prevalence of the growth paradigm and the extent to which the realisation of shrinkage as a structural phenomenon has advanced. It is in the vein of utilising shrinkage, that new approaches to planning for shrinkage, like the post-growth paradigm, have emerged. This paradigm can also be seen as a result of the increased criticism of the traditional growth paradigm in planning. To concretise this paradigm, some scholars have argued that a new vocabulary (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2015) is needed in order to reframe shrinking regions, shrinkage and growth and in this way reveal new paths for planning. Here, the concept of storytelling can serve

as both an analytical (*model of*) and an inspirational (*model for*) tool (Van Hulst, 2012) to understand the current stories that are told about shrinkage and to tell new ones that go beyond traditional perceptions of growth.

For the province of Groningen, it was assumed that planning stories have evolved from trivialising or countering shrinkage (Haartsen, 2008) to narratives that accept or try to utilise shrinkage (Elzerman & Bontje, 2015). Aspects of the growth paradigm were expected to still be present in these new stories, considering planning's path-dependence (Van Assche et al., 2014) and the presumed dominance of neoliberal thinking in planning (e.g. Barry, 2019). In terms of the framing of shrinkage, a focus on demographic developments and changes in the spatial infrastructure were expected (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). Furthermore, following Haase et al.'s (2013) findings, differences between the municipalities of Delfzijl and Stadskanaal were expected as a consequence of their different socio-spatial contexts.

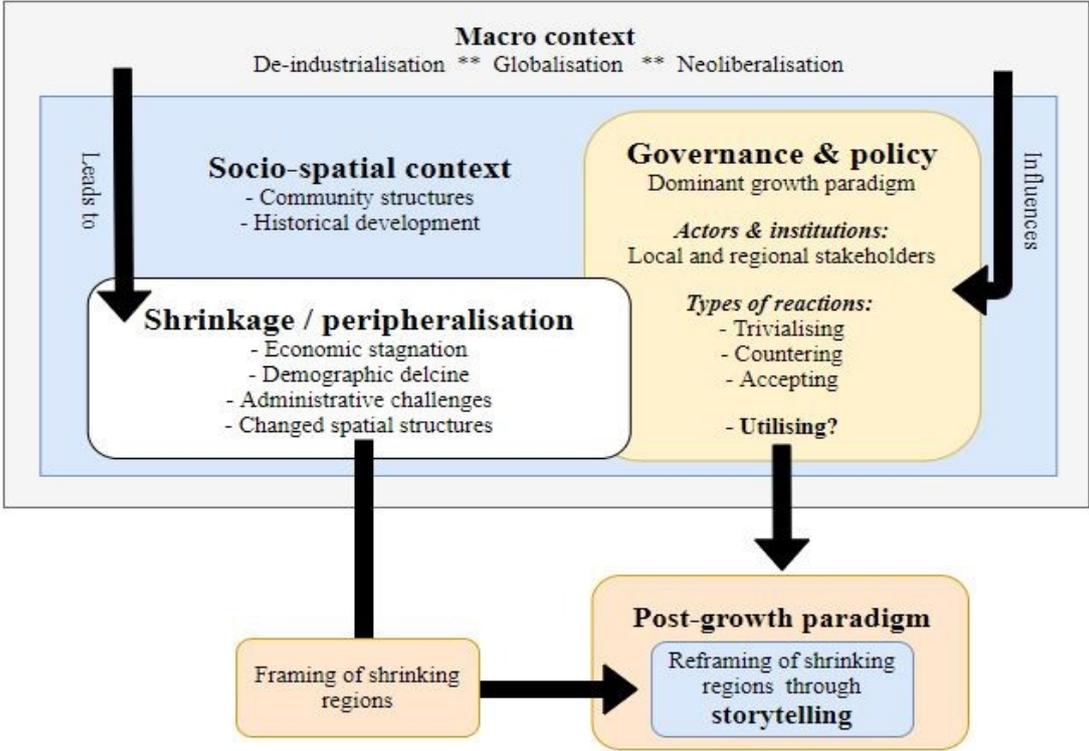


Figure 1: Conceptual model

3. Methodology

3.1 Case-study design

This thesis has done research into planning stories about shrinkage in the province of Groningen. In order to gain insight into this phenomenon, it was decided to use a case-study approach. Yin (2003) has argued that case-studies are valuable for understanding a phenomenon within its relevant context and for gaining insight into the 'how' and 'what' of a case. Considering the earlier observation that shrinkage and peripheralisation are relative and context-dependent phenomena (e.g. Dühr, 2009; Haase et al., 2013), a case-study, thus, provided the best research approach to gain an understanding of shrinkage in the context of the province of Groningen. Baxter & Jack (2008) have argued that after a case-study approach has been chosen, the type of case-study needs to be selected. Yin (2003) has identified three types of cases-studies: explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. In short, the three types focus on causal links, outcomes and context respectively. A descriptive case-study was most suitable for this thesis, since it put the focus on understanding the phenomenon of shrinkage in its context. Such a focus was valuable as it provided better points of departure for understanding and critically analysing the frames that underlie the planning stories in relation to shrinkage. A distinction should also be made between single and multiple case studies (Yin, 2003). The former aims for a holistic understanding of one case, while the latter is mainly occupied with comparing different cases. For this thesis, a single case-study design was chosen, as the main purpose of this case-study was not to compare cases, but to gain insight into shrinkage narratives in the province of Groningen. However, to acknowledge the differentiated drivers and impacts of shrinkage across space three embedded units of analysis were selected: provincial government of Groningen and the municipalities of Delfzijl and Stadskanaal.

3.1.1 Case boundaries

One of the main pitfalls of conducting case-studies is a lack of focus and clear boundaries about what is studied. In practice, such a lack of case-related clarity might lead to an overabundance of data and a potential lack of analytical coherence. In order to prevent this thesis from falling into this pitfall, Yin's (2003) advice to bind the case was followed. This advice encourages researchers to define clear theoretical and spatial-temporal boundaries for their case study. Hence, the province of Groningen was defined as the spatial boundaries of this case study. Temporally this case-study was demarcated based on the data collection period, which lasted from mid-October 2020 until early December 2020. Finally, the theoretical boundaries of this thesis were defined by five main concepts; shrinkage/peripheralisation; the growth paradigm, the post-growth paradigm, regional planning and storytelling.

3.1.2 Case-selection

The province of Groningen was selected as the focus of this thesis for two reasons. First of all, according to recent population data parts of the province of Groningen are already experiencing shrinkage and the phenomenon is projected to become even more salient in the near future (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2020a). The present nature of shrinkage in specific parts of the province made it reasonable to assume that new planning stories are already being formulated. This, in turn, made it worthwhile to explore these stories in relation to the future. Secondly, the province of Groningen is arguably experiencing a process of socio-spatial polarisation. According to current projections, the city of Groningen's relative demographic importance will increase as a result of continued population growth. In contrast, the majority of the other municipalities are projected to experience population shrinkage in the coming decades (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2020a), with all the associated consequences. Hence, studying processes of and responses to shrinkage in the province, it was reasoned, might well contribute to insights as to how this polarisation could be mitigated. For the embedded units of analysis, the following reasoning was made. The municipalities of Stadskanaal and Delfzijl have thus far experienced different trajectories of shrinkage, with the latter having experienced more acute and severe

decline. This difference in the degrees of shrinkage is expected to persist. While the province of Groningen as a whole is projected to experience only limited shrinkage, specific parts of the province will be hit harder by the process. The steepest population decline is currently projected to occur in the municipalities of Delfzijl, Appingedam and Loppersum, followed by municipalities in the south-eastern part of the province, including Stadskanaal (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2020a). Considering the observations of Haase et al. (2013) and Elzerman & Bontje (2015) it was considered to be valuable to explore stories about shrinkage in municipalities that are at different stages of the shrinkage process and will probably formulate different responses to it due to socio-spatial differences. Following Lang's (2012) relational conceptualisation of shrinkage, the decision was made to also include the provincial government of Groningen as a third embedded unit of analysis. It was reasoned that insights from this government level would give an overview of developments in the province as a whole and would hence be able to provide relational reflections on shrinkage in Groningen.

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Operationalisation of stories

The purpose of this research was to explore shrinkage in the province Groningen through the planning stories that are told by planners and the frames that underlie these stories. However, this also raises an important question: What exactly constitutes stories? Riessman (2008) has argued that narratives or stories can be found in all sorts of places, ranging from the oral, to the written and even to the visualised. However, this does not mean that everything can be called a story. Most scholars (Riessman, 2008; Van Hulst, 2012) seem to agree on the notion that a story should move beyond a simple list of bullet points. Instead, stories should plot a sequence of events and a series of actors in their spatial and temporal settings (Chatman, 1978). Such contextualisation will allow a number of separate events to become coherent, which will allow people to make sense of the world or to persuade or mobilise others. Spatial imaginaries and imaginaries were also included in the operationalisation. These metaphors can form the core of a narrative and have the ability to support and strengthen it (e.g. Mäntysalo et al., 2020). Hence, their inclusion allowed for a clearer explication of existing storylines. On a conceptual level, this thesis has mainly focused on planning as a model *of* and a model *for* planning. The third purpose of storytelling in planning identified by Bulkens et al. (2015) was not used, since the purpose of this research was not to identify the personal stories or attachments of planners and citizens to their municipality. Furthermore, the model *for* interpretation of storytelling was used somewhat differently. Instead of it being used as an instrument to make planning more inclusive, it was seen as a tool to potentially reframe shrinkage and shrinking regions.

3.2.2 Data collection methods

For this thesis research two research methods were used: semi-structured interviews with planning officials and a narrative analysis of planning documents. These two methods each have their own specific merits and disadvantages in relation to qualitative research, as will be discussed below. Yet, it was the combination of these methods that allowed this study to obtain a more comprehensive picture of stories about shrinkage in the province of Groningen. It has been argued that although planning documents convey stories in and of themselves (Throgmorton, 1992), these documents only represent the cleaned-up consensus story. Gonzales (2006) has also called planning documents 'crafted processes' on which one group or actor may have had an outsized influence. Hence, by interviewing policy-makers and exploring the context in which stories about shrinkage have been formulated, a more complete picture of existing and competing stories about shrinkage could be compiled. In terms of the relative importance of these two methods, the main emphasis was put on the elicitation and discussion of narratives with planning officials, while the narrative analysis of planning documents was given a more supplementary role.

Semi-structured interviews:

The conducting of semi-structured interviews with planning officials allowed for a more thorough understanding of the planning stories that are being told about shrinkage in the province of Groningen. In order to achieve such an understanding, a general interview guide was constructed (see Appendix A) that was supplemented with some municipality specific questions for individual interviews. The interview was divided in three parts. In the first part of the interview the focus was put on planners' understanding of shrinkage and on the elicitation of the visions that underlie planning for shrinkage in the abovementioned localities. The second part of the interview focused on the selection process of the story and the nature of the story in question. This provided insight into the goals that form the basis for shrinkage policies in the respective municipalities. The third part of the interview served two purposes. It provided space to discuss the specific policies that are currently implemented, while it also invited policy-makers to reflect on and discuss new policies and functions for the region. The nature of the first and third parts of the interviews called for a less structured interviewing approach in order to provide the interviewees with the space to tell their stories and discuss and reflect on new policy approaches. However, in order to be effective in the collection of data and obtain a degree of analytical clarity, structuring questions were included in all three stages of the interview.

Narrative-analysis of planning documents:

In order to analyse the official stories that are told about shrinkage in the province of Groningen, a narrative-analysis was made of a selection of planning and policy documents. Shrinkage is a pervasive phenomenon that inevitably affects a broad range of policy decisions, albeit to differing degrees. The types of documents that were analysed for this thesis were spatial visions, housing visions and liveability plans formulated on the municipal level or provincial level. The plans and documents were collected with the help of government databanks and in-document references to other texts. To guide the analysis of these documents, a comprehensive study of stories in municipal plans in Karlskrona by Walter (2013) was used as an auxiliary source. Walter used three forms of interpretation in order to identify and understand the narratives communicated in written texts. These modes are: explication, narrative explanation and contextual explanation. The first mode of analysis identifies the narrative which is then explained textually and contextually by the second and third modes of interpretation. In this case-study the emphasis was put on the explication of narratives, with a small role for contextual explanation.

3.3 Sample description and data analysis

Sampling method and sample description:

In order to effectively sample policy-makers and planners, preparatory research of potential respondents was first conducted. Policy documents and LinkedIn were used to find policy-makers and planners involved with shrinkage through the fields of liveability, housing or civic engagement (also see Table 1). The first two fields are heavily involved with the spatial and amenity-related consequences of shrinkage, whereas the latter field provided insight into alternative forms of organising amenities or managing space. The preparatory research yielded a pool of eight potential respondents that were each sent an email containing a personal introduction, information about the thesis and a request to participate in an interview. Furthermore, an informed consent form was enclosed (see Appendix B) to allow potential respondents to make an informed decision about their participation. The first round of interview requests yielded five positive responses which translated into four interviews. Respondents D1 & D2 preferred to be interviewed together due to time-management issues. Snowball sampling was used to sample further respondents, which yielded a fifth interview. The five interviews were all conducted online and informed consent was obtained orally from all interviewees. Interviews lasted between 35 and 67 minutes and were conducted in the period between the 24th of October and the 7th of December 2020. Considering the fact that planning departments of rural municipalities are often relatively small and that the number of policy-makers involved with

shrinkage in practical terms is subsequently even smaller, it could reasonably be argued that a saturated sample of policy-makers was obtained. The conducting of additional interviews would likely have led to a repetition of the overall stories that are described in Chapter 4.

| Municipality | Interviewee code | Policy field |
|--------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Stadskanaal | S1 | Spatial planning & maintenance |
| Stadskanaal | S2 | Housing & liveability |
| Delfzijl | D1 | Housing |
| Delfzijl | D2 | Housing |
| Delfzijl | D3 | Area-based policy & civic initiatives |
| Groningen | G | Liveability |

Table 1: Descriptive overview of interviewees

Identification and analysis of stories:

The analysis of the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and the narrative analysis of planning documents was guided by a deductive coding tree (see Appendix C). The coding tree combined elements of the dramatisic pentad used by Walter (2013), the ‘three I’s’ put forward by Pojani & Stead (2014) and the categorisation of shrinkage strategies by Hospers (2014). Concretely, this coding device was divided in three main branches that respectively allowed for 1) an analysis of the framing of shrinkage, 2) a conceptual analysis of shrinkage policies and 3) a contextualisation of the narratives. The story-related branch of the coding tree was used to place the actors and governance structures and events related to shrinkage in their spatial-temporal settings. Herman (2017) has called this process the worlding of a story. The purpose of the other branch of the coding tree was to identify the frames that underlie the planning stories and related policies. It was used to identify and analyse how the phenomenon of shrinkage is framed by policy-makers and to analyse the underlying goals and frames of shrinkage policies. Here specific attention was given to the relative importance of growth and post-growth ideas. Both planning documents as well as interview transcripts were imported to Atlast.ti and coded with the help of the coding tree (see Appendix D for code occurrences). Based on this an abstraction of the information was made that allowed for the reconstruction of the stories being told about shrinkage and an analysis of their frames.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Research ethics is an important issue in academic research. The main reason for this is that in order to maintain trust between researchers and the broad pool of research respondents out there, all researchers have to consider how they collect their data from their respondents and how they handle it afterwards (e.g. Punch, 2014). Hammersley & Traianou (2012) have identified what they consider to be the main ethical considerations in relation to conducting qualitative research, namely, autonomy, anonymity and confidentiality. The following actions were therefore taken. In the requests sent out to policy-makers, interviewees were informed about the purpose of the interview and were sent a digital version of the informed consent form. Interviewees were then asked to orally confirm their consent at the start of the interview based on the enclosed document. The form clarified how the interview data would be stored and used as well as guaranteeing the confidentiality of the obtained information (see Appendix B). Recordings were deleted from online devices after transcription (see Appendix E for further information about transcripts), with copies being stored on a flash drive. One of the interview recordings could not be transcribed due to recoding issues. Notes were made during the interview and extended afterwards. In order to avoid misinterpretation, these notes were sent to the interviewee in question to correct them where needed. As the planning process can sometimes be politically-laden, the decision was made to leave out any specific references to specific officials in both the transcripts and the description of the results. Finally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewees were completely facilitated in their preferences in relation to the date, location and manner of conducting of the interview (i.e. face-to-face or online), so as to not harm their physical health or autonomy.

4. Results

4.1 Case description: Province of Groningen

The province of Groningen is one of the three provinces that together constitute the northern part of the Netherlands. According to Statistics Netherlands (2021), the province currently has around 586.759 inhabitants. In terms of population distribution, around 35 per cent of the population resides in the city of Groningen, which is the main urban centre of the province. The rest of the province is generally considered rural by most Dutch people, although this should be seen as a relative expression (Dühr, 2009). A few smaller urban centres can be found in Delfzijl, Haren, Winschoten, Hoogezand-Sappemeer and Stadskanaal. The province of Groningen has experienced a number of administrative reorganisations in recent years (see also Chapter 2). A series of municipal mergers have brought down the number of municipalities from twenty-three in 2013 to twelve in 2020. Two more municipal mergers are supposed to be finalised in the coming years, bringing the final number of municipalities down to eight.

4.1.1 Population decline and ageing

In the period 2015-2020, the province of Groningen experienced years of limited growth alternating with years of slight population shrinkage. This period of demographic stability is projected to evolve into a period of steady population decline in the coming decades. Until 2025 the province as a whole is expected to experience marginal population growth, but by the year 2050 its population will also have started to decline. Shrinkage is already occurring in specific parts of the province. If one zooms in on the two municipal units of analysis of this thesis, the following picture emerges. The municipalities of Delfzijl and Stadskanaal have experienced similar levels of population decline between 2015 and 2020, with a decline of 2.9 and 2.8 percent respectively. Yet, over the next few decades the population trajectories of the two municipalities are expected to diverge, especially with regard to the magnitude of decline. By 2030, Delfzijl will likely have lost 9.7 percent of its population compared to 2020. By 2050 this number is projected to have increased to 34.4 percent. For Stadskanaal the magnitude of the relative changes in the population is smaller. In 2030 the population of Stadskanaal will likely have shrunk with 3.8 percent compared to population levels in 2020, while by 2050 the current population is projected to have declined with approximately 14.1 percent. Thus, while population decline will continue to be a reality for both municipalities in the coming three decades, the degrees of shrinkage will likely be different for each (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2020a).

Processes of demographic shrinkage are generally strongly associated with selective out-migration and falling birth rates (e.g. Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). In recent years, these processes have similarly been the drivers of modest shrinkage in Delfzijl and Stadskanaal, although the out-migration of households contributed more to the decline in the municipal populations than the fall in natural growth (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2020a). This combination of selective out-migration and falling birth rates lead to an ageing of local populations. Although this process will occur on a nationwide scale, shrinking regions in the Netherlands are expected to be hit especially hard. Te Riele et al. (2019) have projected that by 2035 Delfzijl and the surrounding region will be the most highly aged region in the Netherlands. In that year approximately 34 percent of its inhabitants will be 65 years or older and this situation will persist until 2050 even after the ageing process has slowed down elsewhere. For Stadskanaal similar numbers in relation to ageing are projected, albeit slightly lower. With regard to out-migration, Sociaal Planbureau Groningen (2020b) recently published a report that puts this in perspective. The report concluded that although there is a strong sentiment that young people are leaving the province in droves without returning, a majority of young people remain in their home region, especially in east Groningen.

4.1.2 Amenities under pressure

As a consequence of current and projected population decline and ageing in Delfzijl and Stadskanaal, the provision of amenities like health care and retail services (including

supermarkets) are coming under increased pressure. This challenge has been further compounded by broader societal developments like the rise of e-commerce, digitalisation and the budgetary consequences of the recent decentralisation of social policies to the municipalities.

Delfzijl and Stadskanaal have to deal with a dual challenge here. On the one hand, there is the threat of (complete) disappearance of amenities in the smaller villages. This is especially the case for Delfzijl. On the other hand, both municipalities have to deal with the spatial consequences of disappearing retail services in their urban cores. In response to the latter challenges, the municipalities have started implementing plans that concentrate retail services in smaller areas (e.g. Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2016). This is mainly done to prevent an excess of vacant building within the respective town centres, which might further diminish its quality. On the scale of the smaller villages, similar concentration efforts are being made to sustain and strengthen amenity levels, albeit efforts aimed at concentrating a broader variety of amenities like education, health care and cultural services.

The ageing of the population in municipalities like Stadskanaal and Delfzijl also means that the provision of healthcare is coming under strain. This is specifically related to the process of 'double ageing'. The share of the population that is 65 years or older is projected to increase, but in addition to this that specific population is expected to become older. In practice, this means that the demand for newer and more intensive forms of health care is likely going to increase in the coming years. Simultaneously, the concept of living with or close to care has become an important cornerstone of municipal policies to anticipate the ageing of the population. This means that the issue of providing health care for the elderly will get an even clearer spatial dimension in the future due to its interwovenness with housing. Different living concepts with different spatial needs will need to be implemented in the coming years to accommodate these changes.

4.1.3 An oversized housing stock

One of the main spatial consequences of shrinkage is the emergence of an oversized housing infrastructure. In terms of subsequent changes in the housing stock the following can be observed for Delfzijl and Stadskanaal. In the period between 2011 and 2019, the housing stock of the municipality of Delfzijl grew with a net 16 dwellings, while the housing stock in Stadskanaal shrunk with a net 143 dwellings (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2020c). Interestingly, the gross changes in the housing stock in Delfzijl were smaller than those in Stadskanaal. This difference can likely be attributed to the fact that Delfzijl already implemented a housing stock restructuring programme in the 2000's, making the necessity for large scale interventions in the past decade less pressing. On the sub-municipal scale, Sociaal Planbureau Groningen (2020c) observes that within the shrinking municipalities a process of spatial concentration seems to be occurring. While net changes in the housing stock of these municipalities at large are still negative, they are actually positive in some of the more urban municipal cores. The town of Delfzijl is an example of this where over the period 2011-2019 a net 27 dwellings were added to the stock. This phenomenon did not occur in the town of Stadskanaal, since here the housing stock shrunk with a net 37 dwellings. Again, this difference might be attributable to the history of previous interventions in the housing stock.

4.2 Stories about shrinkage

In response to the increasingly structural nature of shrinkage in parts of the province of Groningen, the provincial and municipal governments have started formulating and implementing policies that are aimed at addressing the negative effects of shrinkage in areas like health-care, the housing stock and other amenities. The remainder of this chapter will be used to explain the stories that have been formulated by the municipalities of Delfzijl and Stadskanaal and the provincial government of Groningen in relation to shrinkage, as expressed by local policymakers and policy documents. This explanation will form the foundation for the analytical discussion of all stories and their overall framing in Chapter 5.

4.2.1 Municipality of Stadskanaal

Dreams of growth: 'Pioneering in the capital of the 'Veenkoloniën'

Between 2008 and 2009 the vision document *'De hoofdstad van de Veenkoloniën, pionieren in de proeftuin'* (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2010) was written. The document starts with discussing the image problems Stadskanaal and the region have among the broader public. The document states the following:

'The region has for a long time had to deal with a negative image of being slow to develop. This image does not suit an area with a rich history and monumental landscape beauty and that has been exceptionally productive in living memory.'

(Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2010, p.3)

In order to counter this negative image the document then elaborates on what can arguably be called a foundational story (Sandercock, 2003). The document refers back to an earlier formulated narrative. This story positions Stadskanaal and the surrounding region as one with a strong pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit. It refers back to the 19th century when Stadskanaal could be called a boom town and when one of the first Dutch multinationals had its base in the region. This has instilled an open and adaptable mindset in the local population that helped it when the town started to deindustrialise with the disappearance of the Phillips factories from the municipality. In addition to this foundational story and the reframing of Stadskanaal's image it aimed to realise, the document also used a so-called spatial metaphor to express its ambitions. The metaphor in question is one of becoming the capital of the 'Veenkoloniën'. This idea is rooted in the geographical location of Stadskanaal. It is considered to be sufficiently distant from the city of Groningen to the west to maintain its independence, while to the east no real competing towns can be found. In order to achieve this spatial imaginary, built around the idea of becoming a subregional capital, the vision defines three ambitions. By 2025 Stadskanaal should be 1) a municipality with excellent residential qualities, 2) a municipality where one can work and learn and 3) a municipality in which there are ample opportunities to recreate.

This vision document mostly reads like an advertising leaflet for the municipality. It sets out an ambitious vision for Stadskanaal but at times gives mixed signals about its goals. The document on repeated occasions reads like a document aimed at creating a booming town and espouses growth-related ambitions in relation to commercial activities as well as increasing the accessibility of the main town. The following phrase from the document is a good example of this:

'With indoor rolling conveyors in the town centre, Stadskanaal has the first semi-indoor shopping mall in the Netherlands, an inviting bad weather attraction for a large (boundary crossing) region.' (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2010, p.6)

On the other hand, a clear focus is put on the recreational value of the area and maintenance of local amenities through local innovations, which at least superficially correspond more with non-growth oriented thinking. Yet, one of the most interesting observations that can be made about this document is the relative absence of direct references to shrinkage. Several indirect references to the topic are made in the form of a statement of desire to keep providing residents with a diverse amenity package, a reference to the ageing of the population in relation to health care provision and a reference to (potential) vacancies in retail properties in the town centre. Future demographic developments are mentioned on a few occasions, but these references are almost never made concrete and only implicitly touch upon the reality of shrinkage. The storyline that is put forward in by this vision document hereby almost seems to trivialise the issue of shrinkage or if one makes more lenient assumptions proposes to reverse the process. This narrative may be explained by the following statement from interviewee S1:

'That was also a bit the transition period of, uh, "We're going to grow" to the realisation of being a shrinking municipality. Around 2010 that was.. the tipping point.'

In other words, the vision document was formulated before and or during the transition period from growth-oriented thinking to shrinkage-oriented thinking, which to some degree makes it explicable that demographic shrinkage was discussed relatively little in the vision document. This process of realisation (e.g. Danielzyk et al., 2002) was likely sped up by the unachieved ambitions of two housing projects of which one will be discussed briefly. Interviewee S1 mentioned how in 2003 the municipality had bought a large plot of land close to the village of Alteveer with the plan of building around eighty to ninety new houses in the area and expand the village. However, by the year 2008 and the subsequent housing market slump the project had completely failed to materialise. Only recently, the interviewee stated, have five or six plots been sold and at significantly lower prices. Although, this housing project can perhaps not fully be described as a countering strategy to shrinkage (Hospers, 2014) assuming that it was based on growth expectations, it does show how for Stadskanaal the reality of shrinkage was only fully acknowledged relatively recently and how quickly things have changed for the municipality in terms of their thinking and ambitions. This is arguably also reflected in two further observations. First, neither interviewee of the municipality referenced the vision document during the interview and when asked about it interviewee S2 indicated to only have some vague knowledge about it, which might suggest that the document is now considered outdated. Another indication might be that interviewees S1 and S2 both stated that in terms of cooperation with other municipalities no significant clashes of ideas or interests have occurred in recent years. Rather, they argued that in East-Groningen municipal cooperation in relation to shrinkage has become more intensive, especially in order to prevent waterbed-effects (Interviewee S1). Consequently, if one wants to prevent these effects, a document that positions one's own municipality as the capital city of the region might not be the most suitable document to use as the cornerstone of a shrinkage policy.

A new reality: Quality in shrinkage

As a result of the tipping point that was reached around 2010 (interviewee S1), the storyline told by the municipality in relation to shrinkage has changed. The growth-oriented ambitions that were once on the agenda (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2010), have been replaced by a new narrative. Currently the municipality is still engaged in the process of formulating a new comprehensive environment vision (Interviewee S1), but a good indication of this new narrative could already be found in the exploration document for the environment vision (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2019) and the most recent housing vision (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2020)

In terms of textual content, the housing vision distinguishes itself in at least one significant way from the abovementioned vision document (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2010). Shrinkage is given a much more central role in the explication and explanation of the narrative. Projected demographic developments for the municipality in the coming years are explicitly discussed. References are made to both population and household decline, as well as, the subsequent ageing of the population. Of these three frames, ageing returned most often in the document. It is used to explain the qualitative and quantitative challenges in the housing stock and the challenges in relation to health care provision for the elderly. In this sense, shrinkage is framed in a way that strongly corresponds with the arguments made Haartsen & Venhorst (2010), namely that shrinkage in the Netherlands is not an issue of extensive population decline, but a phenomenon characterised by demographic ageing and a changing population composition. A similar framing of shrinkage was to some extent identified from the interviews. Both interviewees (S1 & S2) started their explanations of shrinkage with a reference to demographic decline and ageing but then also elaborated on the spatial and amenity-related consequences of the phenomenon. Despite this focus on the demographic developments underlying shrinkage in constructing a storyline for the future, interviewee S1 argued that this is not always easy. On at least two occasions in the past few years demographic decline in the region turned out to be less grave than expected based on previous projections. Consequently, interviewee S1 indicated that it is at times difficult to set out a clear vision for the future and that such news events also generate more growth-oriented narratives in the political and public sphere. One of these narratives is discussed further below.

Nevertheless, these discrepancies between demographic projections and actual developments have not led to a situation in which the story told about shrinkage by the interviewees and the policy documents can be described as either a trivialising or countering strategy to shrinkage (Hospers, 2014). Interviewee S1 stated the following about the strategy:

‘Not trying to reverse it [shrinkage], but more like guiding it in a decent way. Ensuring that, well, that the quality of live can be maintained.’

A similar sentiment was echoed by interviewee S2 who indicated that the aim of current policy is not becoming a ‘booming town’ but rather to maintain liveability. Interviewee S1 admitted that, as outlined above, population projections might overestimate the pace of shrinkage, but that the trend of decline will likely continue. The firmness of this new sentiment is also reflected in interviewee S1’s opinions about the growth-oriented narrative built around the ‘Nedersaksen’ rail connection. In short, it has for a long time been a goal of the municipal council to regain access to the regional railway network by revitalising the old railroad tracks in the town of Stadskanaal. Interviewee S1 argued that among local politicians and the public, a narrative is put forward in which a revitalised railway connection will attract new households to the municipality. This would supposedly reverse shrinkage and require the municipality to be more ambitious in their housing plans. Interviewee S1 was willing to admit that, if the project is actually realised, the train connection will have an impact on the municipality, but he also expressed scepticism about whether the project will actually be able to reverse the current and projected demographic decline. This also seems to be the consensus view among the municipal policy community since both interviewees indicated that no alternative growth-oriented visions have been formulated.

Instead, the overall story that comes forward from the housing vision, the exploration document and the interviewees can probably best be placed somewhere in between the accepting and utilising strategies of Hospers (2014). A good slogan for the strategy would arguably ‘Quality in shrinkage’. The stated aim of the housing vision is for instance:

‘The municipality wants to keep providing sufficient quality housing for different target groups and be a nice residential municipality for its inhabitants’

(Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2020, p. 3)

This narrative about liveability was mostly calibrated on the spatial consequences of shrinkage. Interviewee S2 argued that it was the municipality’s aim to prevent the emergence of a ‘very gloomy picture’ with few amenities, a large amount of vacant dwellings and a perforated built environment. In order to prevent such gloominess from occurring the municipality has started to reduce the planned housing capacity by terminating current plans. The reasoning behind this policy was succinctly summed up in the exploration document: ‘Adding dwellings (in one place) will enhance the challenge of shrinkage elsewhere’ (Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2019, p. 6).

However, the storyline that is told is not solely based on accepting shrinkage and maintaining a liveable municipality. The new storyline also contains elements that are aimed at providing space for new kinds of initiatives. Both interviewees said that the slower than expected pace of demographic shrinkage has provided the municipality with some manoeuvring space to also utilise shrinkage to innovate in the and diversify the housing stock and built environment. The most recent housing vision provides space for a limited expansion of the housing stock in specific market segments and also expresses a desire for the use of more flexible and temporary living concepts. In this way the municipality does not simply seem to aim to maintain the current quality of the housing stock and the built environment but also to add new quality through infill development in the form of, for instance, tiny houses (Interviewee S1). Interviewee S2 indicated that neither the market nor civil society have thus far made any concrete proposals to realise tiny houses, but recently the municipality has started conversations with a civic initiative that wants to realise a co-housing project aimed at intergenerational living. The above observations seem to reflect the still somewhat experimental nature of efforts by Dutch municipalities to also use shrinkage as an opportunity (Elzerman & Bontje, 2015)

4.2.2 Municipality of Delfzijl

Realisation: From industrial expansion to large scale vacancies

Shrinkage has for quite some time been an important theme in the story of the municipality of Delfzijl. According to interviewee D1, the topic was first acknowledged in the early 1990's when the first demolition plans were formulated and implemented. In this period the spatial consequences of demographic shrinkage had become acutely apparent within the town of Delfzijl and the municipality had to act. In the preceding decades, industrial expansion had led to rapid demographic growth in the main town of Delfzijl. This growth narrative was strengthened further by population projections made at the time. For instance, in the 1950's it was projected that by the year 2000 the municipality of Delfzijl and the neighbouring municipality of Appingedam combined would have 100.000 inhabitants. As a result of these projections a spacious urban structure with large neighbourhoods was created to accommodate this demographic growth (Gemeente Delfzijl, 2017). By the early 1990's the demographic expansion had been replaced by a reality of shrinkage which translated into a large number of vacant dwellings and a pauperisation of the urban landscape (Interviewee D1). However, it was around the year 2000 when the real tipping point was reached and when the municipality faced the daunting reality of around 700 vacant dwellings. According to interviewee D1, an 'administrative hassle' to transform the housing stock emerged around this time and with the help of external advisors the (social) housing stock was restructured and reduced in size during the remainder of the decade.

In many ways, the above timeline reflects the transition from a story based on growth expectations to a story that acknowledges shrinkage as a reality. Both interviewees referred to the industrial growth-narrative to contextualise the problems that Delfzijl has had to deal with in terms of planning in the context of shrinkage. Interviewee D1 indicated that the spatial structure of the town of Delfzijl was built to accommodate 80.000 inhabitants, but these numbers have never been reached. In other words, the housing stock and infrastructure of Delfzijl were and in certain areas still are 'completely over dimensioned' (Interviewee D2) and the municipality had to downsize its spatial structure to prevent an empty and largely vacated town from emerging.

A repositioning: A compact harbour town with vital villages

The year 2010 saw the start of a new period in the formulation of a planning story for Delfzijl in relation to shrinkage. In this year the first large scale restructuring of the housing stock in the town of Delfzijl was completed, but this also raised questions about the steps that had to be taken next (Interviewee D1). In the period that followed the municipality entered talks with neighbouring municipalities and the provincial government to formulate a regional housing- and liveability plan, the municipal goals of which were concretised in an integral investment programme (Gemeente Delfzijl, 2012) and the municipal housing vision (Gemeente Delfzijl, 2017).

In these documents demographic shrinkage is used repeatedly to contextualise the proposed interventions, since they still form the main basis of municipal policy (Interviewee D1). However, in the broader story that is told, population developments play a subdued role. For instance, in the housing vision and the investment programme demographic decline and ageing are talked about in general terms but with little reference to concrete numbers. Instead, the document predominantly discusses residential vacancies and how the municipality aims to proactively prevent these on a large scale. Similarly, the investment programme presents a storyline for the villages that is focused on the need for the concentration of the amenities that remain to make these villages robust rather than a story about population numbers.

The main story that emerges from both the documents and the interviews is a story of remaining a liveable town and municipality, which is similar to the story formulated in Stadskanaal. Concretely, the municipality aims to re-achieve the liveability scores it had in 2012 and possibly even higher (Interviewee D1). An important observation to here is that the drop in liveability scores after 2012 is largely attributable to the consequences of the gas-extraction induced earthquakes in the region (RWLP, 2016). This context-specific aspect of the municipality of Delfzijl has led the liveability narrative to strongly overlap with the narrative of making Delfzijl

earthquake-proof (Interviewee D3). The municipality aims to achieve a synergy between the two challenges (Interviewees D1 & D2). Practically, this will likely lead to a spatial development that is at the surface counterintuitive in the context of shrinkage. Interviewee D2 referred to the fact that based on the demographic developments one would not expect large scale new housing projects to be implemented in Delfzijl. Due to the earthquakes a larger number of dwellings will be demolished but at the same time more dwellings will be rebuilt in a more robust way than would be expected if shrinkage would be the main driver behind the initial demolitions.

Within the broader story of (re)becoming a liveable municipality, two sub-stories can be identified in the policy documents and from the interviews. These sub-stories revolve around 1) the town-centre of Delfzijl and the urban neighbourhoods and 2) the rural villages. The main ambition for the town of Delfzijl was summarised by interviewee D1:

'We are actually working on repositioning the town of Delfzijl as compact and as complete as possible in relation to the future'

As a result of Delfzijl's historic development, the shrinkage narrative for Delfzijl also has a clear line revolving around the spatial shrinkage of the municipality's main town. This process of spatial shrinkage has been initiated and sustained with the aim of creating a 'stronger town' (Interviewee D2). In the housing vision this ambition was summed up by the maxim 'green on the edges, more compact in the centre' (Gemeente Delfzijl, 2017). The municipality wants to become an attractive residential municipality where people can live surrounded by a more rural and green environment. Interviewee D1 talked about how in the past they would 'build new dwellings on meadows', but that they now 'demolish dwellings to create meadows' (also see Figure 2 below). This strategy strongly resembles urban greening strategies that have been deployed in other shrinking towns (Hummel, 2015). One of the spatial consequences of this policy is that the urban structure of Delfzijl will become more decentralised. The IIP talks about the possible transformation of Delfzijl's neighbourhoods into 'diverse villages' that are surrounded by a rural landscape and that are spatially more separated from each other (Gemeente Delfzijl, 2012). In addition to these strategies of spatial shrinkage and urban greening, the municipality is also using the spatial imaginary of Delfzijl as 'attractive harbour town' in order to reposition the town for the future. The storyline built around this metaphor focuses on the town's maritime and cultural-historic qualities with the aim of transforming Delfzijl into an attractive and dynamic place (Interviewee D1). One of the main projects that has been executed to achieve this is the Marconi-project. This project has redeveloped the harbour zone of Delfzijl by re-integrating the town's urban structures with the sea in order to emphasise its maritime qualities.

In relation to the municipality's rural villages the housing vision and the IIP have formulated a story that revolves around the ideas of vitality and recreation. The IIP states that the main goal of the municipality's interventions in the villages is to create:

'A vital countryside with unique residential villages and recreational amenities'
(Gemeente Delfzijl, 2012, p. 19)

This story of a vital countryside is rooted in the framing of these villages as having manifold cultural-historic qualities and having a strong social fabric. It is argued that the cultural-historic value that can be found in the traditional mound villages might be attractive for tourists, and should perhaps be emphasised more (Interviewee D3). As for the social fabric, the IIP and the housing vision both state that the villages in the countryside have a strong social cohesion and club life, which can be helpful in addressing the increasing pressure on local amenities as a result of shrinkage (Hospers, 2014). Here, the municipality has aimed to make a 'quality improvement' in the social infrastructure of villages and neighbourhoods (Interviewee D3). This has translated in a two-pronged strategy. First, the municipality aims to 'concentrate and cluster' the local amenities that are still viable on the village scale as much as possible with the aim of making them more robust. The best of expression of this policy has been the construction of multi-functional centres (MFC's) that often house a selection of amenities like primary schools, a library and sports

facilities. Second, the municipality has implemented a policy called ‘All villages, a roof’. This project consisted of a subsidy scheme supported by provincial funds and was based on the idea that every village or neighbourhood in the municipality should have a decent community centre where residents can meet on a daily basis or in local associations. According to interviewee D3, robust community centres are essential in maintaining the liveability and cohesion of the municipality’s villages, especially those that no longer have any kind of amenities. Both of the abovementioned strategies are embedded in the regional place hierarchy that has been developed in the RWLP (2016). In essence, this hierarchy aims to cluster amenities on the region scale. The town of Delfzijl is considered a regional centre which emphasises its caring role for the region and the subsequent need for a complete amenity package. Two villages (Spijk and Wagenborgen) have been designated as centre-villages. These villages are considered to be essential in keeping amenities locally accessible in the context of continued shrinkage and efforts are therefore made to preserve them as long as possible.

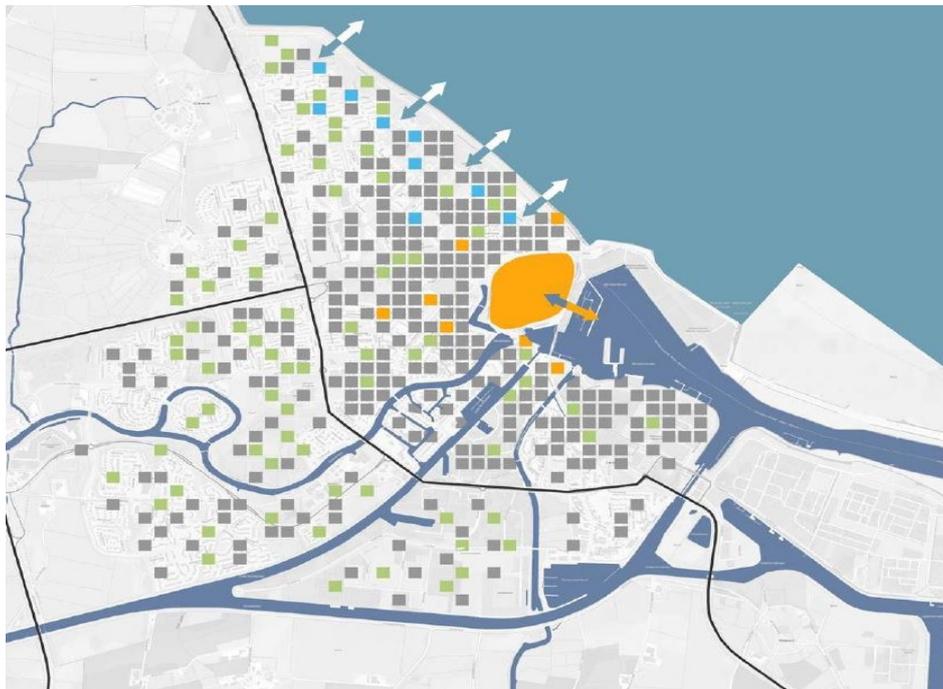


Figure 2: Prospective spatial development of the town of Delfzijl (Gemeente Delfzijl, 2017)
 (Arrows = possible maritime connection; Green boxes = greening; Grey boxes = compacting)

4.2.3 Province of Groningen

Keeping shrinking municipalities liveable

According to interviewee G, the year 2010 was an important moment in the formulation of the provincial story in relation to shrinkage. That year demographic decline was put firmly on the provincial policy agenda by the publication of a report that indicated that shrinkage was going to be a serious challenge in parts of the province. This finding was re-confirmed by the Krikke commission in 2014 and as a reaction to these reports the provincial government started formulating plans aimed at addressing the effects shrinkage. It, for instance, asked municipalities to formulate RWLP’s that would allow local needs and governance structures to be reflected in their approaches (Interviewee G). In the provincial shrinkage narrative, shrinkage is mainly framed as an issue of liveability. This is, arguably, also reflected in the fact that the most recent shrinkage agenda has been integrated in the broader liveability plan of the provincial government (Provincie Groningen, 2020b), whereas the first shrinkage agenda was published as a separate document (Provincie Groningen, 2015). Relatively little emphasis is put on the demographic component of shrinkage. Demographic decline and ageing are mentioned to contextualise and explain the proposed actions, but the documents largely refrain from elaborately discussing the

demographic symptoms of shrinkage. This arguably reflects a high degree of realisation in relation to the topic (Danielzyk et al., 2002). Interviewee G emphasised that shrinkage is more about ageing than decline in Groningen, as has also been observed by Haartsen & Venhorst (2010) for the Netherlands in general. However, she also argued that the main challenges of shrinkage are emerging in the sphere of amenities and health care.

The overarching provincial story about shrinkage has thus far been set out in two documents: a shrinkage agenda (Provincie Groningen, 2015) and the recently published executive programme on liveability (Provincie Groningen, 2020b). The policies explained in these documents can best be categorised as part of an accepting strategy (Hospers, 2014). The executive programme explicitly states that:

'The aim of the shrinkage agenda in the coming period remains: the mitigation of the side effects of shrinkage' (Provincie Groningen, 2020b, p.23)

The relevance of this aim was confirmed by interviewee G who argued that reversing shrinkage is not a tenable strategy for the province in the long term. This belief is rooted in a criticism of the applicability of growth models in shrinking regions. The interviewee used the example of vacant buildings. In a growing city vacant dwellings can relatively easily be assigned a different purpose. In shrinking regions this is not possible since other functions, like commercial activities, are also disappearing. The more abstract goal of the provincial shrinkage agenda is to ensure that people will still be able to live in a nice and liveable environment (Interviewee G). To achieve this, the provincial government has created three policy pillars aimed at clustering amenities, downsizing the housing stock and revitalising regional economies. The latter pillar at the surface suggests a continued desire for growth, but at the same time mostly seems to focus on creating a better connection between vocational education and the labour market to address social problems. Interviewee G found it difficult to concretely tell where the province is headed with these interventions considering the multidimensionality of shrinkage. However, she did indicate that the current agenda will help create more resilient village amenities and an aptly-sized housing stock from which the 'bad teeth' have been removed. The bad teeth metaphor was also used by other interviewees (e.g. Interviewee S2) to refer to buildings and dwellings that are beyond repair and should be removed to prevent a pauperisation of the built environment.

Considering the overall presence of growth and post-growth frames in this liveability story, a somewhat conflicting picture emerges. On one hand, the executive programme introduces and emphasises the concept of broadly-measured prosperity, in which prosperity is no longer just expressed solely in terms of income (Provincie Groningen, 2020b). Due to the fact that a connection is explicitly made between liveability and shrinkage, it could be argued that, to some extent, more post-growth ideas are used in relation to shrinkage. However, no concrete plans have been developed in this vein. On the other hand, at times one can also recognise frames based on more growth-oriented thinking in the executive document. The most explicit example of this is reflected in the following statement that was put in bold letters in the document:

'And there is no revenue model, shrinkage is a cost item'
(Provincie Groningen, 2020b, p. 24)

While this statement naturally reflects the financial-administrative reality for many shrinking regions (e.g. Syssner, 2020), it also is a relatively negative framing of shrinkage and one that is mostly focused on shrinkage as a phenomenon that fails to generate enough economic benefits to sustain itself. This frame might to a large extent be an expression of the stubbornness of growth thinking among planners driven by governmental financing structures (Wiechmann, 2008). It reflects that discussions about shrinkage can remain mired in the financial and economic disadvantages of shrinkage, despite efforts to introduce more post-growth concepts. This might suggest that although growth as a goal of shrinkage policies might have been abandoned, growth-oriented considerations still play a role in the new narratives that have been formulated as will be further explored in the next chapter.

5. Discussion

5.1. Framing of shrinkage

Shrinkage in Groningen is strongly framed as a structural development that poses serious challenges to planning in the region. This framing is rooted in the process of realisation that has occurred over the past two decades. Shrinkage is no longer framed as a phenomenon that is temporary and can easily be resolved in the future, as would be the assumption in the early stages of realisation (Danielzyk et al., 2002). For Stadskanaal, this process of realisation started more recently compared to Delfzijl. This difference in timing might be explained by looking at the differences in spatial contexts and the trajectories of demographic developments. For Delfzijl, the demographic developments that underlie shrinkage have been unfolding for a longer time and the rapid growth that Delfzijl experienced in the 1950's and 1960' made the spatial consequences of shrinkage more apparent. Delfzijl's infrastructure was built on a much larger scale with the expectation of further expansion, but in the context of shrinkage this has led to an especially oversized spatial structure in which vacancies emerged earlier and more often. This observation supports Haase et al.'s (2013) argument about the important role local context plays in the manifestation of shrinkage processes. As for the provincial government, the realisation that shrinkage was a structural issue largely coincided with the realisation in Stadskanaal.

Returning to the conceptual model and theory, three ways of framing/explaining shrinkage were identified: structural, process-oriented and image-based. The latter is discussed later in this chapter. In the planning stories outlined above, the phenomenon of shrinkage was mainly framed in structural terms. In both interviews and policy documents, demographic developments were used to explain what constitutes shrinkage, albeit sometimes in a muted way. Multiple interviewees emphasised that although population decline is certainly occurring in Groningen, the most important outcome of this development will be the ageing of the regional population. This is in line with Haartsten & Venhorst's (2010) argument that shrinkage in the Netherlands will mainly raise challenges with regard to an altered population composition rather than decline per se, especially compared to other European regions (also see Dühr, 2009). Shrinkage was also strongly framed as an issue with impacts on liveability. The loss of amenities or the quantitative and qualitative mismatches in the housing stock were used by several interviewees to explain the local impacts of shrinkage and the potential decline in liveability. The choice to broaden discussions about shrinkage beyond demographics might be based on the reality of having to work with outdated and ever-changing statistics (Interviewee S1). Alternatively, this decision might also have helped in framing shrinkage as an opportunity. The necessary interventions in relation to shrinkage were framed as a chance to simultaneously deal with other problems. On the provincial level, for instance, shrinkage has been framed as an opportunity to address quality deficits in the housing stock (Provincie Groningen, 2020b). The frame of 'shrinkage as an opportunity' might be very appealing but also raises questions about the focus that is put on the actual topic. In Delfzijl, attempts by the municipality to find a synergy between the challenges of shrinkage and local earthquakes and thereby positively 'reposition' (Interviewee D1) the town might also divert attention away from shrinkage-related development and inhibit policy innovations. Making a housing stock more robust mostly follows conventional ways of development and does not incentivise the development of alternative forms of growth.

When it comes to process-oriented explanations of shrinkage, the policy documents almost completely refrain from such framing of shrinkage. In contrast, some interviewees did offer procedural explanations of shrinkage. Interviewees G and D1 argued that part of the explanation for shrinkage can also be found in the current funding of municipalities and the broader national spatial policy. These mainly benefit urban agglomerations, for instance, through additional lumpsum funds that are given to the four largest cities irrespective of the usual funding criteria like population size. Interviewees G and D3 also stressed the relationality between the growth of cities and the shrinkage of the regions. This explanation of shrinkage echoes the criticism of the neoliberal and centralising spatial policies that have become dominant over the past four decades (e.g. Galland, 2012) and point at the need for broader changes.

5.2 Liveable for whom?

The overall planning story in Groningen in relation to shrinkage revolves around the idea of 'remaining a liveable municipality/province'. In general, there seems to be a broad consensus about this narrative within the planning departments of the municipalities and the province. Interviewees were asked whether any alternative visions had been formulated in recent years to deal with shrinkage and without exception they answered that within their departments this had not been the case. Several interviewees (S1, G, D1 and D3) did indicate that alternative visions and narratives have emerged from the political and public sphere, but they all expressed scepticism about the realism that underlies these alternative ideas of reversing shrinkage. This consensus has also manifested itself in the inter-municipal cooperation in shrinkage. Apart from some start-up in the initial stages of these cooperative discussions (Interviewee G), almost all interviewees argued that cooperation with other parts of the region were running smooth, especially in relation to interventions in the regional housing stock. Nevertheless, interviewee D3 indicated that due to the challenges of the earthquakes in the north of Groningen and the recent and upcoming municipal mergers the amount of attention shrinkage is receiving on the municipal or inter-municipal level seems to have declined. This problem will in the medium term also become relevant for Stadskanaal and indicates how the administrative challenges of shrinkage in rural areas (Syssner, 2020) complicate efforts to give the topic full and continued attention. This then reinforces the need for a concrete and compelling story about the future.

The consensus story that is put forward is based on the premise that a worst-case scenario in terms of liveability should be prevented for local inhabitants. This has in practice led to efforts aimed at limiting the number of housing vacancies and preventing losses of amenities. In this sense, the new story that has been formulated corresponds almost perfectly with Hospers' (2014) accepting strategy, thereby also supporting Elzerman & Bontje's (2015) finding that accepting strategies predominate in the Netherlands. However, despite the apparent realisation that shrinkage will be a structural development for the region and that re-achieving growth is likely not a realistic scenario, the observation that the liveability story has moved fully beyond traditional growth should be approached critically on two different accounts.

First, on a conceptual level the above stories seem to have been calibrated around a seemingly less growth-oriented goal, namely, liveability. The concept returned repeatedly in both policy documents and conversations with policy advisors. It was often used to summarise or to commence an explanation of the vision that has been described above. Yet, as has been observed by Ruth & Franklin (2014), the concept of liveability has proven to be rather ambiguous and difficult to translate into practice. This was also acknowledged by interviewee S1 who referred to it as a container concept but who still used the term to summarise the more abstract goal of the municipality's new planning story. However, the diffuse nature of a concept like 'liveability' potentially also captures a more diffuse storyline. A liveable municipality could very well also be the goal of a countering strategy to shrinkage, in which investments are made in the spatial environment to make a place or region more attractive to new business and households. Hence, the ambiguity of a concept like liveability also opens the door to a contestation of the new story. In the case of Stadskanaal, the more popular connectivity narrative around the 'Nedersaksen' railway line could water down the seemingly less growth-oriented story explained above. Furthermore, the maintenance of liveability levels or in the case of Delfzijl re-achievement of past liveability levels as the aim of shrinkage policies raises the following question: Liveability for whom? If improving conventional liveability scores is the goal of shrinkage policies then traditional growth considerations will continue to play a role in the new planning story. Conventional Dutch liveability scores are calculated based on a broad range of measurable indicators, like the number of cafes and restaurants that are present within a range of 1 kilometre (Leefbarometer, 2021). Such indicators arguably reward places that grow and negatively affect the scores and popular perception of shrinking places. Efforts aimed at maintaining a liveable spatial environment could then be seen as an attempt to keep a place attractive within the logic of growth, while failing to encourage alternate developments. Furthermore, a continued focus on conventional living concepts (e.g. family homes) or amenities actively prevents the development

of alternative forms of development and welfare. Thus, improving liveability might not represent an actual break with growth-oriented ambitions.

Another observation that arguably makes the framing of the new story in relation to growth and post-growth considerations less clear is the use of the spatial imaginary of the 'attractive harbour town' by the municipality of Delfzijl. The 'Harbour town' narrative could very well be called a foundational story (Sandercock, 2003) and is arguably used to support the broader liveability narrative. Such stories can be effective in mobilising stakeholders for planning challenges (Mace & Volkmann, 2017), but they also often refer to a glorious and growing past, as can also be seen in the 'Pioneering capital'- narrative that was used by Stadskanaal. For Delfzijl a reference to its character as a harbour town might also inspire ambitions to re-achieve the glory days of the 1950's and 60's. Or it may be used to reposition the municipality as having certain qualitative advantages compared to the surrounding region, as will be discussed in the next subchapter. This, in turn, might suggest that the broader liveability storyline about accepting (Hospers, 2014) shrinkage and becoming a compact and green town is at least made somewhat more ambiguous by using the foundational story of Delfzijl. Interviewee D1 indicated that the concept of Delfzijl as a harbour town is used to show the dynamism of the town. However, dynamism does not necessarily have to equal growth in economic or demographic terms. Furthermore, the harbour town storyline was mainly considered to be a reaction to a popular narrative about shrinkage in Delfzijl. Many residents of the city seemingly feel that as a result of the extensive post-WW2 reconstruction efforts and the recent restructuring programmes so much has already been demolished that the 'gems' that are still there should be preserved (Interviewee D1). This might suggest that the maritime narrative has not been adopted as a strategy to re-achieve growth, but rather to maintain the historic and social qualities of the built environment for those residents who choose to stay in the municipality. Nevertheless, the use of such stories can still fuse with traditional growth ambitions.

5.3 The idyll of shrinkage

On the provincial level the introduction of the concept of broadly measured prosperity might be a promising first step in diverting attention away from the achievement of growth and towards broader welfare. On the municipal level both Delfzijl and Stadskanaal have engaged in discussions that try to reimagine what their municipalities can be in the future. This is strongly related to the image-based conceptualisation of shrinkage. Although, none mentioned it as a driver of shrinkage, a number of interviewees (D1, S1 & S2) did refer to the negative connotations 'shrinkage' has and how this also affects the popular perception of their municipalities. To change this image the idea of becoming a 'residential municipality' has emerged, where people can live in a spacious, green and socially connected environment (Interviewee S2). Both have also expressed their openness to new living concepts like tiny houses (Interviewees D1 & S2) or their desire to create a unique living 'Delfzijlster' housing environment in which 'living on the water' is promoted (Interviewees D1 & D3). The degree to which this reframing of shrinking areas is a real departure from the growth paradigm can again be questioned. The idyll of shrinkage that the municipalities want to create is akin to a strategy of positive self-peripheralisation. Plüschke-Altöf (2019) has argued that image-based strategies in peripheral areas build on neoliberal discourse and put an emphasis on growth and local responsibility. Likewise the creation of a unique maritime living environment in Delfzijl can be seen as an attempt to gain a competitive housing market advantage and attract new households for whom space and greenery are wishes. Furthermore, the 'residential municipality' idea in itself can get a connotation that the municipality mainly serves as an overflow area for growth in the city. This connotation is illustrated well by the following statement:

'We see the region of east Groningen as an attractive living environment that can relieve the housing market elsewhere.'

(Gemeente Stadskanaal, 2019, p. 2)

Reframing the function of a municipality to a mainly residential one is unlikely to be a sustainable strategy in the long term. It generates a relationship of dependency between shrinking and growing regions that is based on the premise of continued growth in the city. This might subsequently prevent the development of real alternative development paths that are calibrated on more differentiated conceptions of welfare and growth. A further potentially complicating factor in these discussions might be the impact of the coronavirus. All interviewees indicated that they are currently watching the housing market developments. There are some signs that the stay-at-home orders have made people appreciate space and rurality more (Interviewees D1, S2). At the same time, this development is surrounded by uncertainty. Interviewee G expressed scepticism about the benefits for shrinking regions in Groningen, asking which rural regions in the Netherlands would benefit the most. These events might, nevertheless, inspire the formulation of new storylines in the public and political sphere. Stories that view this development as a way to reverse shrinkage, thereby complicating the development of a practical post-growth planning.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, stories about shrinkage in the province of Groningen seem to have stabilised around the goal of maintaining decent liveability levels for inhabitants. This narrative is rooted in a structural framing of shrinkage that focuses on the demographic and spatial consequences of the process. In contrast, in only a few cases is shrinkage framed in a process-oriented way that gives attention to the relational and policy-related dimensions of the phenomenon. In Groningen shrinkage manifests itself in an ageing and slightly declining population, an oversized and outdated housing infrastructure and a loss of local amenities. This multidimensionality has made 'liveability' an attractive concept for municipalities to construct new narratives. At first sight, the 'liveability' narrative seems to suggest that traditional growth ambitions have moved aside. This assumption is supported by the downsizing and concentration policies that are being implemented and the scepticism expressed by interviewees about reversing shrinkage. However, the full abandonment of traditional growth-oriented planning can be questioned. Liveability is an ambiguous concept that can easily be contested by growth narratives. Moreover, if used in combination with conventional conceptualisations of liveability, the narrative might still lead to policies that do not break with current growth-oriented planning practice. Likewise, the use of foundational stories with nostalgic and competitive elements may complicate adopting a real post-growth planning if used to attract new inhabitants.

The idea of competition also returns as a pitfall in the current ideas in Delfzijl and Stadskanaal for reframing shrinkage and their function as municipality. Both have the ambition to reframe themselves as unique residential municipalities, an ambition that might be strengthened by promising housing market prospects resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the competitiveness that is expressed by the desire for uniqueness, might suggest that although traditional growth is no longer the main goal, aspects of the growth-paradigm remain sticky. Hence, the liveability narrative needs to be further informed by the question 'Liveable for whom?' and enriched by what Dax & Fischer (2018) have called social innovations that attempt to 'measure' the 'growth' of indicators like the economy and environment in a qualitative way.

What comes forward from these observations is that the extent to which storytelling is able to serve as a catalyst of change (Sandercock, 2003) is in practice limited in several ways. The path-dependence of government policies (Van Assche et al., 2014) has limited a full break with traditional growth considerations in Groningen. The new planning story mainly builds on conventional concepts of development and success, namely, liveability. Hence, the policies that are implemented based on this story are also relatively conventional and aim to achieve 'success' within the existing logic. This is also rooted in the framing of shrinkage in this narrative. Shrinkage is mainly framed in terms of its symptoms and the shrinkage story has been aligned with this. In this narrative shrinkage generates certain problems following the logics of growth and liveability and these problems have to be addressed with policies like downsizing or concentrating amenities. While it is difficult to criticise this maintenance policy in and of itself, it does fail to effect real change. To some extent this is not surprising considering the fact that planning stories inherently build on the past and other stories rather than present completely new realities (Van Hulst, 2012). However, this also suggests that a social-constructivist approach to shrinkage (Leick & Lang, 2018) need to be explored further and at least approached critically with regard to its transformative abilities. Alternative vocabularies (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2014) or stories might form inspiring first steps, but it will take time and persuasion to also transform shrinkage policies and their underlying logic. Persuasion can be achieved by storytelling, but if a post-growth planning is to be developed more concrete steps are needed as well. One of these steps would be to expand the space to experiment with new approaches. Here national funding will play a key role. Interviewee G indicated that the provincial government is already lobbying for more national funds to finance the current shrinkage strategy, but more is needed. Additional funds would allow shrinking municipalities to take the initiative and to experiment with new living concepts or amenity systems that are aimed at creating a broader kind of welfare. Currently the ability or

willingness of private or civic parties to undertake these initiatives is limited (Interviewees S2). This could also make the liveability narrative more viable going forward, as it would concretise what liveability and development should entail in a non-growth and for whom places should in fact be made liveable.

Furthermore, it should be noted that comprehensively planning for shrinkage will also require moving beyond the municipal and provincial levels. Shrinkage is a relational process (Lang, 2012), which makes including the city of Groningen and the broader Netherlands in the formulation of a post-growth planning necessary for it to be successful. In the Netherlands, a continued focus on urban growth in Groningen keeps the prospect of tapping off some of that growth alive in shrinking municipalities like Stads kanaal and Delfzijl. This, in turn, inhibits the reframing of what 'growth' entails for shrinking places. Similarly, emphasising the qualities of shrinkage on the local level, risks ignoring the broader factors that drive shrinkage (e.g. national policy). Thus, future research should also explore the national planning narratives that are told about shrinkage and growth and find areas in which progress can be made. The shrinkage narratives that were identified in this microcosm of European socio-spatial developments contain sticky growth elements, that are bound to return on other levels as well. As Raagmaa et al. (2019) have argued current EU-cohesion policies have mostly been counterproductive. Hence, if a more cohesive and post-growth planning for shrinkage is to be developed these discussions need to be expanded to the national and European scales. Just like the tale of the 'Stad' cannot be seen as separate from the tale of the 'Ommeland', so should the shining lights of Berlin and London no longer be seen as separate from the decline in Saxony and Yorkshire. Their tales need to be critically reassessed to formulate a post-growth narrative.

7. Reflection

This thesis has explored planning narratives about shrinkage in the province of Groningen. One of the main weaknesses of this thesis is its failure to include either more shrinking municipalities or the city of Groningen in its scope. This is counterintuitive to one of the main arguments made in this thesis, namely, that shrinkage is a relational process. Although, the inclusion of the provincial government is a somewhat mitigating factor, adding the city of Groningen to these discussions would have added more theoretical weight to this study. This inclusion would have been possible if a clearer research focus had been established earlier. Another weakness of this case-study is the focus on practical policies. The latter made the stories that were identified very heavy in terms of practicalities and low on the more historical and/or contextual aspects that are important in the mobilising ability of these narratives. In hindsight this could have been prevented by putting more emphasis on these factors in the interviews and using the policy-documents for the policy projects. The combination of the interviews and document-analyses is simultaneously one of the main strengths of this study. By combining these two methods the debates and objectives underlying the policy documents could be probed. This contributed to the main finding of this thesis that storytelling can be persuasive, but that path-dependence complicates the achievement of real change. The interviewing and the sample of policy-makers presents both a weakness and a minor strength. A saturated sample of policy-makers for each of the three units of analysis was obtained, as was confirmed by the correspondence in the stories and contact with other potential interviewees. Nevertheless, the sample of the province of Groningen is small and a further interviewee would have given the results more credibility. This could have been achieved by organising the practicalities of the interviews a few weeks earlier, since this would have provided more time to sample respondents.

Finally, on a more procedural note, the time-management for writing this thesis was well-organised. At times, some difficulty in staying fully engaged was experienced due to the Covid-19 circumstances. However, these dips in attention were handled effectively by fully disengaging for one or two days to clear the head. Contact with my thesis supervisor was regular and a progressed document was handed in every time. The only real slip-up here was the submission of my draft for the complete thesis, which was handed in after the Christmas break rather than before it.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introductory questions

- How would you describe your position as a planner for the (insert location)?
- How long have you been involved with the topic of shrinkage?

Part I: Shrinkage and story stories about and for shrinkage

- How would you describe shrinkage?
 - What do you believe are the key aspects of the phenomenon?
 - How do you believe shrinkage comes about?
- Could you please tell me about the vision that you and your colleagues have constructed or are constructing in order to deal with shrinkage in (insert location)?
 - What have been the key events in relation to shrinkage in recent years?
 - How do the past and local community structures play a role in your vision for the future?

Part II: Selection process and the nature/frame of the story

- What kind of alternative visions for (insert location) have come up during the process of thinking about how to deal with shrinkage?
 - Why have some of these alternatives not been selected?
 - To what extent have local community (and governance) structures influenced this selection process?
- How would you describe the nature of your vision for (insert location)?
 - What is the more abstract ambition/main goal?
 - What is the situation you are aiming to (re)achieve with your vision? In other words what do you envision (insert location) to be like in 2040?
 - To which extent does the achieving of an increased quality of life for the community play a role in your vision for (insert location)?

Part III: Policies and new ideas

- What are the policies that you are implementing or planning to implement in order to realise your story for (insert location)?
- How do you cooperate and coordinate with other governments in relation to shrinkage?
 - What are the main difficulties you encounter when cooperating?
 - How does your vision align or contrast with the vision of other governments (i.e. municipalities or the province)?
- What kind of innovative/new forms of organising services and amenities have you seen emerging in (insert location) in order to deal with shrinkage?
 - How much priority do you give to such new ideas (e.g. the social economy, co-housing local exchange systems)?
 - How relevant do you believe these new organisation forms are for the future of shrinking areas?
- To what extent do you believe that the reframing of shrinking regions can play a role in defining a better future for (insert location)?
 - Which kind of functions could potentially be promising in this respect?
 - What kind of role do you think the coronavirus could play in reframing shrinking regions and/or shrinkage?

Closing questions:

- What are current/upcoming projects that you are really excited about to implement?
- Do you have anything to add? Or do you want to adjust any of your statements?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B: Informed consent form

Toestemmingsovereenkomst deelname interview:

Door dit formulier te ondertekenen erken ik dat:

- Ik op de hoogte ben van de inhoud en intentie van de masterscriptie,
- Ik mij ervan bewust ben dat de informatie verkregen door het interview alleen zal worden gebruikt in de desbetreffende masterscriptie,
- Ik mij ervan bewust ben dat de verkregen informatie niet verspreid zal worden naar derde partijen of gebruikt zal worden voor andere doeleinden,
- Ik mij ervan bewust ben dat delen van de interviews direct geciteerd kunnen worden in het eindproduct en alleen in het eindproduct (i.e. masterscriptie),
- Ik mij ervan bewust ben dat de inhoud van de interviews uitsluitend zullen worden gedeeld met de scriptiebegeleider wanneer hiervoor toestemming is gegeven,
- Ik mij ervan bewust ben dat van het interview een audio- opname zal worden gemaakt, om de authenticiteit van het interview te waarborgen (Deze bepaling is optioneel en zal definitief worden besproken tijdens de afspraak).
- Huidige toestemming niet bindend is en deelname ten alle tijden kan worden teruggetrokken, zonder opgave van reden.

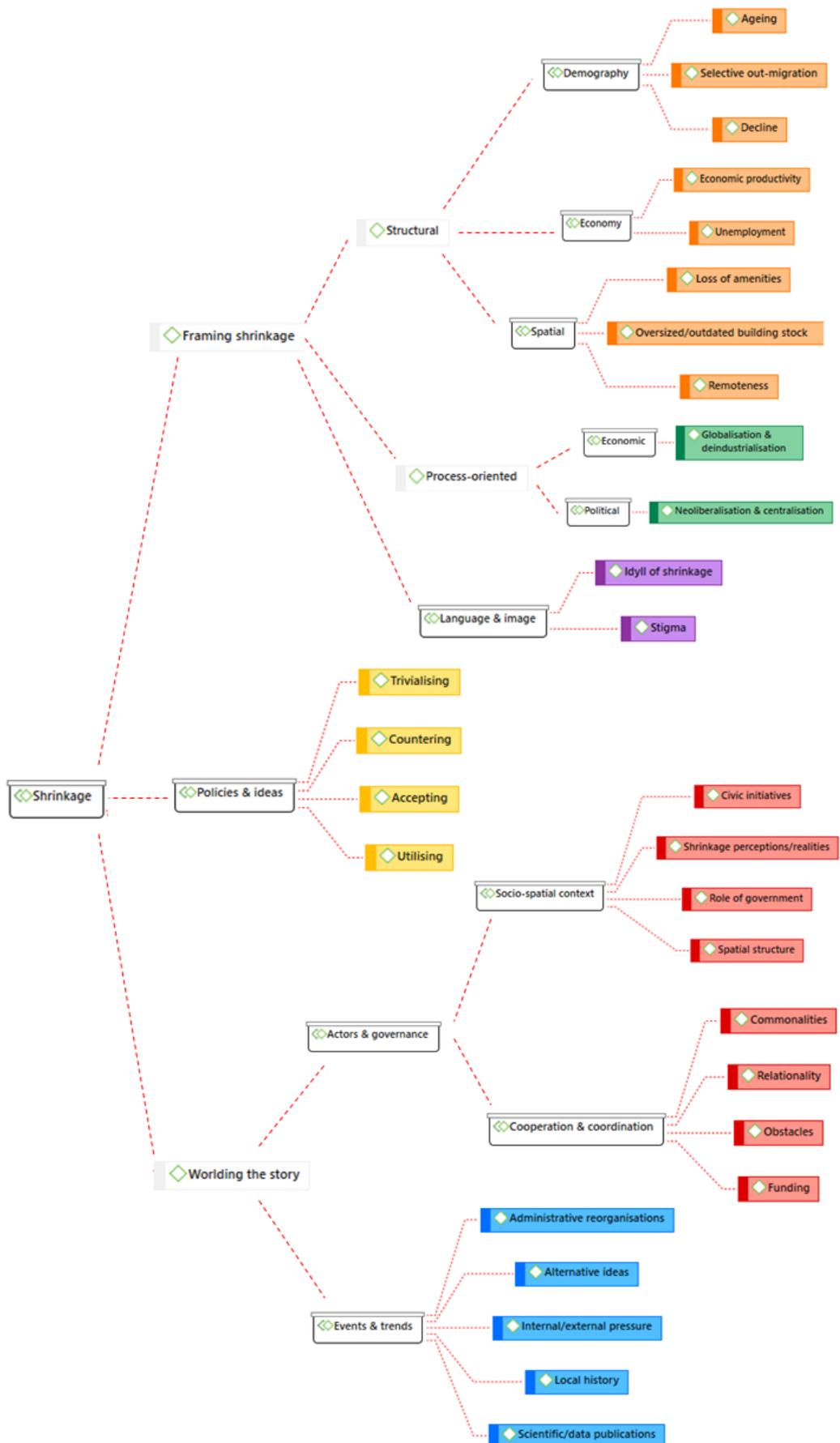
Al het bovenstaande in beschouwing nemende geef ik (voorlopige) toestemming voor deelname aan het interview onder de genoemde voorwaarden. Voor vragen of eventuele afmelding kunt u mailen naar d.k.van.gennip@student.rug.nl onder vermelding van 'Interview masterscriptie'.

| Naam | Handtekening | Datum |
|-------|--------------|-------|
| | | |

Ik verklaar dat de participant geïnformeerd is over het onderzoek. Ik zal deelnemer(s) inlichten over eventuele veranderingen die invloed kunnen hebben over zijn/haar/hun besluit om wel of niet deel te nemen aan het onderzoek.

| Naam | Handtekening | Datum |
|-------|--------------|-------|
| | | |

Appendix C: Coding tree



Appendix D: Code occurrences

Interviews:

| Code | Occurrence |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Demography | |
| Decline | 6 |
| Ageing | 8 |
| Selective out-migration | 3 |
| Economy | |
| Economic productivity | 2 |
| Unemployment | 2 |
| Spatial | |
| Oversized/outdated building stock | 4 |
| Remoteness | 1 |
| Loss of amenities | 7 |
| Political | |
| Neoliberalisation & centralisation | 3 |
| Economic | |
| Deindustrialisation & globalisation | 1 |
| Language & image | |
| Stigma | 7 |
| Idyll of shrinkage | 11 |
| Policies | |
| Trivialising | 1 |
| Countering | 13 |
| Accepting | 47 |
| Utilising | 17 |
| Cooperation & coordination | |
| Commonalities | 4 |
| Obstacles | 5 |
| Relationality | 14 |
| Funding | 10 |
| Socio-spatial context | |
| Civic initiatives | 12 |
| Role of government | 8 |
| Shrinkage perceptions/realities | 7 |
| Spatial structure | 1 |
| Events & trends | |
| Administrative reorganisations | 5 |
| Local history | 4 |
| Internal/external pressure* | 10 |
| Scientific/data publications | 2 |
| Alternative ideas** | 15 |

*Examples are earthquakes or Covid-19

** Examples are tiny houses, eco-villages

Policy documents:

| Code | Occurrence |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Demography | |
| Decline | 15 |
| Ageing | 14 |
| Selective out-migration | 0 |
| Economy | |
| Economic productivity | 2 |
| Unemployment | 0 |
| Spatial | |
| Oversized/outdated building stock | 22 |
| Remoteness | 1 |
| Loss of amenities | 9 |
| Political | |
| Neoliberalisation & centralisation | 1 |
| Economic | |
| Deindustrialisation & globalisation | 0 |
| Language & image | |
| Stigma | 2 |
| Idyll of shrinkage | 8 |
| Policies | |
| Trivialising | 1 |
| Countering | 26 |
| Accepting | 76 |
| Utilising | 14 |
| Cooperation & coordination | |
| Commonalities | 2 |
| Obstacles | 0 |
| Relationality | 13 |
| Funding | 8 |
| Socio-spatial context | |
| Civic initiatives | 10 |
| Role of government | 7 |
| Shrinkage perceptions/realities | 2 |
| Spatial structure | 7 |
| Events & trends | |
| Administrative reorganisations | 0 |
| Local history | 11 |
| Internal/external pressure* | 9 |
| Scientific/data publications | 2 |
| Alternative ideas** | 6 |

*Examples are earthquakes or Covid-19

** Examples are tiny houses, eco-villages

Appendix E: Interview transcripts

Access to the interview transcripts and notes can be obtained by sending an e-mail to the following address: doo-hwan@hotmail.com.