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# Multiscalar Governance of Shrinkage in the Netherlands: Past, Present... Future?

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## Abstract

The extent of shrinkage in the Netherlands is rather limited so far. Still, the Netherlands was one of the first European countries that introduced a national-level policy for regions facing structural population decline and shrinkage in 2009: the Population Decline Action Plan. This happened in response to local and regional policy initiatives and a lobby of local and regional governments, but also because the Minister of the Interior perceived shrinkage as a national policy challenge. This action plan was an attempt to arrange a multiscalar governance of shrinkage at national, regional, and local scales. However, this policy ended in 2019, and its last remaining element, a targeted subsidy for regions facing structural population decline, ended in 2022. This article will discuss (a) how and why the policy was introduced and how its governance was arranged, (b) how the policy changed between 2009 and 2022, (c) why it ended, (d) which new regional policies have been developed recently instead, and (e) what this could mean for the governance of shrinkage in the Netherlands.

## Keywords

multiscalar governance; population decline; population policy; regional shrinkage; the Netherlands

## 1. Introduction

Shrinkage has claimed a prominent place on the research agenda of urban, rural, and regional studies scholars. While most research on shrinkage has been done in Europe, North America, and Japan, other parts of the world, like China, Australia, and Latin America, are also increasingly being studied. Looking at longer-term demographic and socio-economic development trends in the world, it is likely that shrinkage will become a global phenomenon in the decades to come (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2016).

For policy-makers and politicians, it is often difficult to accept shrinkage as a structural trend that requires other policies than the usual growth-oriented policies. Meanwhile, though, an increasing number of cities and regions are trying to adapt their policies to structural shrinkage. Such policies are mainly developed at the local or regional scale. The few exceptions where shrinkage is seen as a national policy concern include Germany and Japan (Mallach et al., 2017).

It is remarkable therefore that until recently, a national population decline policy existed in the Netherlands, a country where shrinkage has, so far, only affected a much smaller part of the country than in most other advanced capitalist countries (Ivanov, 2022). The Dutch population at the national level was still growing when this policy was introduced in 2009 and was still expected to grow for several decades. At the regional level, shrinkage was already acknowledged as a structural trend in the relatively peripheral regions at the country's borders, but also expected to spread across larger parts of the country. The Population Decline Action Plan was introduced in 2009 (BZK et al., 2009), followed by a second action plan in 2016 (BZK, 2016). The end of the second action plan in 2019 also meant the end of an explicit national population decline policy. New regional policies were introduced targeting all regions of the Netherlands. Population decline and shrinkage were still on the national policy agenda, but more implicitly and with much less priority than in 2009. This loss of urgency was related to changes in population development and changing policy agendas at both national and regional levels. Language also mattered: though shrinkage seemed to be accepted as a structural trend for some years, more recently national and regional policy-makers perceive it rather as too negative a policy concept.

In this article, we will reflect critically on how and why the Dutch national population decline policy was introduced and how its governance was arranged, how the policy changed between 2009 and 2022, why it ended, which new regional policies have been developed recently, and what this could mean for the governance of shrinkage in the Netherlands. Because frequent references are made to the regional and administrative geography of the Netherlands, a basic map of the Netherlands (Figure 1) is added below for the readers' orientation.

The policy documents analysed include the two action plans (2009 and 2016), letters from the responsible ministers to the parliament about these plans, reviews and evaluations of the plans and agreements to implement the plans at the regional level, lobby documents, research reports, and policy advice. Apart from analysing these policy documents, national and regional policy-makers involved in the action plans and/or more recent regional policies have been interviewed. The respondents included two former programme leaders of the action plans at the Ministry of Interior Affairs, a project coordinator at the knowledge platform and network organisation Platform31, and four policy-makers involved in the action plans at the provincial level in the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland. The interviews (some onsite, some online) lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. After the interviews, some of the respondents also sent additional policy documents and/or other relevant texts like media articles to include in the analysis. Next to these respondents, additional information was collected from others involved in the action plans or related policies via mail exchanges and LinkedIn messages.

Because the action plans were set up as joint ventures of national, regional, and local governance actors, and because of the multiscale nature of shrinkage (see also Section 2.2), it made sense to analyse these plans through a multiscale governance lens. Both in the document analysis and in the interviews, the analysis focused on how governance was arranged within and between the governance layers, how tasks and



**Figure 1.** Map of the Netherlands and its provinces. Source: Kaarten en Atlassen (2024).

responsibilities were divided between the stakeholders at different governance levels, and how this changed over time. As will become clear from the analysis, this also involved creating new regional governance arrangements and instruments and/or strengthening existing ones to target shrinkage at the right scale level(s).

## 2. The Governance of Shrinkage

### 2.1. Shrinkage Governance Discourses

Stakeholders in the governance of shrinkage usually go through several stages of perceiving shrinkage and acting upon this (Derks et al., 2006; Elzerman & Bontje, 2015; Hospers, 2014). The first phase could be

called “ignoring” or “trivialising”: Shrinkage is not yet seen as a structural challenge, and planning remains mainly growth-oriented. Next, when shrinkage is perceived as a structural trend, it is not yet accepted, and planning response aims for a return to growth (“observation without acceptance” or “counteracting”). This may be followed by a phase in which shrinkage is finally accepted and planning is adapted to this situation. Hospers (2014) suggests that in a fourth phase, shrinkage could be utilised: perceiving shrinkage as a positive development and taking advantage of it. Though some cities and regions have indeed tried to do this, so far this perception of shrinkage has remained exceptional. Beunen et al. (2020) applied evolutionary governance theory in their comparative analysis of how Dutch regions responded to population decline. From this perspective, the evolution of policy responses to shrinkage is influenced by three types of dependencies: path-dependencies (legacies from the past, institutional arrangements, and discourses), inter-dependencies (between actions, decisions, actors, institutions, and relevant knowledge), and goal-dependencies (shared ideas about future development).

The language of shrinkage and its governance reflects how planners, policy-makers, and researchers struggle to accept shrinkage. Shrinkage originates from the German concept *schrumpfende Städte* (shrinking cities) and has been translated literally into several other languages, like *krimp* in Dutch (Cunningham Sabot & Ročak, 2022). For many, though, shrinkage is not perceived as a neutral concept, but as something negative to avoid or a problem to be solved. Alternative concepts with less negative connotations have therefore been introduced, like “legacy cities” in the US. Also, researchers accepting shrinkage as a neutral or positive concept frequently use other terms for the same process, like “vanishing cities,” “urban decline,” “post-industrial cities,” “a new phase of urban development,” “urban transformation,” “demographic decline,” and “demographic change” (Hospers, 2014). This conceptual confusion also includes researchers referring to shrinkage as “degrowth,” for example as the literal translation of the French *décroissance*. As should become clear in this thematic issue, though, degrowth should not be seen as a synonym for shrinkage.

So far, discourses about the governance of shrinkage are unfortunately hardly related to discourses about degrowth. Both debates problematise the mainstream growth paradigm in urban and regional planning. While “planning for shrinkage” has not yet managed to become a widely accepted alternative paradigm, and is sometimes even criticised as just another variation of the mainstream growth paradigm or “austerity urbanism” (Aalbers & Bernt, 2019; Hackworth, 2015), degrowth may become such an alternative paradigm. Instead of accepting shrinkage as a given and adapting planning to that situation, planning for degrowth rather calls for a fundamental change in how we plan and develop our cities, regions, and societies. Some shrinkage researchers have suggested that shrinking cities could serve as “labs” or “testing grounds” for sustainable urban development and degrowth (Haase et al., 2016; Hermans et al., 2021) or to establish a “culture of degrowth” (Reverda et al., 2018), and that adapting to shrinkage “resonates with thinking in degrowth and social-ecological sustainability” (Liu, 2022, p. 22).

## 2.2. Multiscalar Governance of Shrinkage

Debates about the governance of shrinkage are dominated by urban shrinkage. Urban studies scholars and urban planners, in particular, are prominently represented in this field of research. The first and most influential analyses of shrinkage were cases of de-industrialising cities and regions like Detroit, Liverpool, Leipzig, the US Rust Belt, and the German Ruhr Area. Most often, though, shrinkage takes place in less urbanised environments like small towns and rural areas. The results and policy recommendations of urban

shrinkage research are less applicable in less urbanised shrinkage contexts; and in urban shrinkage research, the local governance context is stressed most, while in less urbanised contexts the regional and national governance contexts are often at least as relevant. Fortunately, such contexts also get growing attention, related to concepts like peripheralisation and non-core regions (Leick & Lang, 2018).

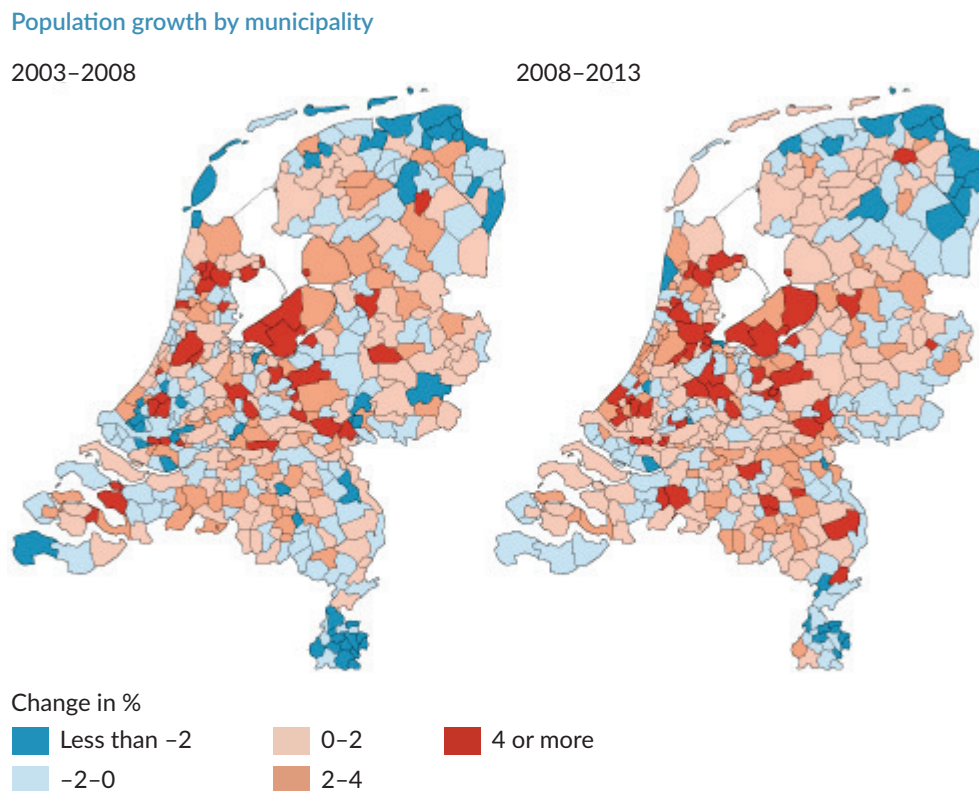
Effective responses to shrinkage cannot be developed only at the local governance level. Processes and mechanisms causing shrinkage operate at scales varying from local to global, and the impact of shrinkage is often not just local but also regional. Shrinking cities and villages do not manage to solve their problems by themselves; they need support from governments and other stakeholders at regional and national scales. At the supranational scale in Europe, the EU is also a relevant governance partner with programmes like the Cohesion Policy (Haase et al., 2016). A shrinkage policy focusing on the regional level only would probably also not work well, because the impact of shrinkage may vary considerably within regions. The spatial and socio-economic inequalities related to shrinkage include not only inter-regional inequalities but also intra-regional inequalities (Hoekveld & Bontje, 2016; Randolph & Currid-Halkett, 2021). Sub-local governance scales like neighbourhoods in cities or villages within a municipality may also be relevant; often there is not just one regional scale, but several. Shrinkage is a multiscale process requiring multiscale governance.

The Population Decline Action Plans in the Netherlands could be seen as an attempt to establish a multiscale governance of shrinkage. National, regional, and local governments, non-governmental organisations, and citizen initiatives were involved. In the governance of shrinkage debate, both multilevel governance and multiscale governance are frequently used concepts that seem to be applied rather interchangeably. Though the concepts are indeed closely related to each other, Jonas (2015, p. 27) argues that scale is better able to capture political processes beyond formal hierarchies, acknowledging the emergence of “new scales of political organisation and governance, which do not map directly onto the corresponding levels of the state.” Moreover, the action plans were set up and implemented in a political-economic context of rescaling, in which governance tasks were redistributed between governance layers and partly also to non-governmental actors (Kokx & van Kempen, 2010; Waterhout et al., 2013). Therefore, a multiscale perspective fits better than a multilevel perspective in the analysis of the Dutch action plans.

### 3. How Shrinkage Became a National Policy Priority in the Netherlands

In the early 2000s, population projections indicated that population decline would become a structural trend in several Dutch regions. In some regions, population already started to decline in the 1980s or 1990s. Some local and provincial policies were already aware of the population decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it was not yet seen as a structural phenomenon that needed more policy action (Beunen et al., 2020). Figure 2 shows municipal population change in 2003–2008, the years in which population decline was gradually more acknowledged as a structural trend, and 2008–2013, the years in which this increasingly led to national and regional policy action.

Limburg was the first Dutch province where *krimp* (shrinkage) was mentioned in research reports and policy documents. In 2004, it was mentioned in a report about Limburg’s ageing population that had a considerable impact on policy debates. Even earlier, *krimp* had been referred to in a draft regional plan, but the provincial deputy of spatial planning personally deleted the word (interview former programme leader of demographic



**Figure 2.** Population change in Dutch municipalities, 2003–2008 and 2008–2013. Source: CBS et al. (2014).

transition Province of Limburg, 10 October 2023). A breakthrough in the shrinkage debate was the report that Derks et al. (2006) wrote for two national policy advisory councils. In this report, Derks and colleagues made clear that population decline was already a structural trend in some regions, especially border regions, that this trend would spread across larger parts of the country, and that this would soon have a substantial impact on regional and national development. They considered the Dutch population projections unrealistic and were also critical of the dominant growth paradigm in spatial, societal, and economic development policies. According to Derks et al. (2006), the impacts of demographic change were hardly taken into account in national and regional policies. Even though the change from growth to decline still seemed some decades away in most of the country, related trends like ageing and a decreasing labour population were already starting to impact the economy and society, and this impact was expected to grow. Already in the 1990s, Wim Derks pointed at population decline as an emerging structural trend, but back then policy-makers did not accept that message yet (Gybels, 2016).

In response to this report, the regions already facing shrinkage and the provinces they were situated in started reconsidering existing policies and developing new policies. In the Province of Limburg, a “knowledge arena” meeting was organised in 2006, with Wim Derks as one of the keynote speakers. From then on, shrinkage and demographic transition were acknowledged as policy priorities in Limburg at the provincial level and in the most affected regions, in particular Parkstad Limburg. Parkstad is a polycentric city region in the southeast of Limburg. As a coal mining region, it urbanised rapidly in the 20th century, until the coal mines were closed between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Despite national government efforts to transform and revitalise the regional economy, the region has struggled socio-economically for several decades. Related to this, structural population decline started in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the new

regional name Parkstad Limburg was introduced and a city-regional governance structure was set up (Beunen et al., 2020; Elzerman & Bontje, 2015; Hoekstra et al., 2020). The province, the Parkstad region, and local and regional policy advisors tried to frame shrinkage in positive terms. Shrinkage was referred to as a “chance”; Limburg was said to have a “demographic advantage”; and both Limburg and the Parkstad region saw themselves as “pioneers” in developing shrinkage policies. In the Province of Zeeland, the provincial executive taking office in 2007 considered a policy response to demographic changes one of their most important challenges. Though the population of Zeeland as a whole was still expected to remain stable until 2025, some regions were already experiencing structural population decline or would soon be faced with this trend. The agenda-setting policy document *Onverkende Paden (Unexplored Paths)* was the start of regional shrinkage policies in Zeeland (Provincie Zeeland, 2008; interview policy officers Province of Zeeland, 25 September 2023).

At the national level, shrinkage received increasing attention from research and policy advice institutions. The Spatial Planning Agency and its successor, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), published several reports and articles about shrinkage and its implications for spatial development and policy (van Dam et al., 2006, 2008; Verwest & van Dam, 2010; Verwest et al., 2008). In 2008, the Council for Public Governance (ROB) and the Council for Financial Relations (RFV) published influential policy advice concerning the financial and governance implications of population decline (ROB & RFV, 2008). In 2009, the demographic research institute NIDI dedicated its yearly report about population questions to the transition from growth to shrinkage (van Nimwegen & Heering, 2009).

In February 2009, the conference *De nieuwe groei heet krimp* (“The New Growth Is Shrinkage”) was organised in Kerkrade (Latten & Musterd, 2009). The Minister of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration, Eberhard van der Laan, was invited to open the conference. He combined this with a work visit to the cities of Maastricht and Heerlen. In Heerlen, shrinkage was the main theme of this work visit. In a newspaper interview, he stated that he returned “quite depressed” from his visit to Heerlen, which he perceived as “a city in decay and decline” where a back-to-growth strategy would not work anymore. Being used to mainly thinking in terms of growth-oriented solutions, this opened his eyes to a new reality. Van der Laan saw shrinkage as a national concern and called for solidarity between growing and shrinking parts of the country (van der Laan, 2009). In the months following this conference and work visit, the Dutch parliament was informed about the planned interventions of the national government (van der Laan & Bijleveld, 2009). Former minister Hans Dijkstal and former mayor of Kerkrade and Enschede Jan Mans, the so-called *Topsteam Krimp* (“top team shrinkage”), were asked to prepare policy advice for the region of Parkstad Limburg and the provinces of Groningen and Zeeland (Dijkstal & Mans, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The *Topsteam Krimp* helped to give shrinkage more urgency at national, provincial, and municipal policy levels (interview policy officer Province of Groningen, 6 October 2023). Meanwhile, a national policy agenda for the spatial implications of shrinkage was prepared (Renooy et al., 2009), and the knowledge network *Nationaal Netwerk Bevolkingsdaling* (National Network Population Decline) was founded. In June 2009, a policy conference was organised with representatives of the national government, provinces, municipalities, and relevant societal organisations. These were important stepping stones towards *Krimpen met Kwaliteit* (“shrinking with quality”), leading to the national Population Decline Action Plan (BZK et al., 2009).



#### 4. First Population Decline Action Plan (2009–2015)

The first Population Decline Action Plan was a remarkable document in several respects. First, it was not a “top-down” national policy plan, but a joint product of national, regional, and local governments and several other relevant societal actors. It was acknowledged that structural population decline required a multiscalar collaborative strategy (Ivanov, 2022). Second, shrinkage was perceived as an irreversible process, so an explicit choice was made for an approach aimed at the consequences of shrinkage, instead of trying to get back to growth. Third, the plan combined short-term actions to tackle the most urgent issues and longer-term strategic actions. While the formal plan period was 2009–2015, several actions were intended to continue beyond 2015. Fourth, a programme of local experiments was included in the plan. The potential impact of structural population decline and shrinkage was not yet known sufficiently, so the local experiments were meant as a “learning by doing” programme in which lessons about the most effective policies could be learned. Examples included an innovative approach to reduce vacancies of retail space, establishing village development corporations and cooperatives, setting up a joint health centre to attract and retain general practitioners, housing corporations buying vacant dwellings from private owners unable or unwilling to invest in maintenance, and trying to make housing markets in border regions more attractive for residents from adjacent regions across the border. After the first round of experiments from 2010 until 2014, two more rounds of experiments followed until the programme ended in 2019. Some experiments failed, but most were successful, and some of them also led to follow-up actions (Platform31, 2013; Ubels et al., 2019; interview former coordinator experiments Platform31, 12 May 2023). Finally, the plan reminded the large cities that they had been helped by generous urban renewal programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. Now the regions facing population decline and socio-economic problems should be supported, and the large cities should show solidarity.

Three elements were highlighted as essential in the first action plan:

1. Timely awareness: Next to what was already discussed in the previous section, this included debates with the Dutch parliament, a documentary, information provision through several websites, and the founding of the knowledge institute NEIMED, with the ambition to become the national knowledge hub for the societal effects of shrinkage.
2. Clear task division and regional governance strength: This is where the multiscalar governance approach of the action plan becomes most apparent. National, provincial, and local governments each had their own roles to play but were also supposed to collaborate closely. Next to these formal governance layers, a new informal regional governance level in-between province and municipality was added, and non-governmental organisations were also actively involved in the implementation of the action plan. Municipalities were expected to develop locally specific policies, take the possible impacts of population decline on local finances and service provision into account, and actively involve their residents and make them aware of the consequences of population decline. The importance of regional governance strength was stressed. Because shrinkage in the Netherlands was affecting regions rather than single municipalities, the regional scale between province and municipality was considered the most appropriate scale to deal with the impact of population decline. Unfortunately, though, this scale is the weakest link in the Dutch governance system. Most Dutch regions do not have formal governments, so inter-municipal collaboration mainly has to be arranged voluntarily. The only shrinkage region that managed to establish a more formal regional governance arrangement was

Parkstad Limburg. Therefore, the role of the provinces to supervise and encourage regional collaboration in the shrinkage and anticipation areas was important, too. The national government saw its role mainly in setting the policy agenda, developing visions, increasing awareness, developing and exchanging knowledge, and adapting national policies, laws, rules, and financial instruments to the specific circumstances of regions facing structural population decline. Apart from these governmental actors, local and regional societal organisations like housing corporations, healthcare institutions, and school boards were also highlighted as important partners.

3. Effective funding system: The main topics highlighted here were the restructuring of the housing stock, maintaining and redesigning public space, and adapting public service provision like schools, healthcare, and social services to a changing population. In the Netherlands, the *Gemeentefonds* (Municipal Fund) is the main source of income for municipalities. Through this fund, the national government redistributes tax revenues to the municipalities. A set of about 60 characteristics determines how much money each municipality will get. This includes characteristics regarding population size and population composition, as well as the capacity of municipalities to generate their own income through local taxes and land development. As a pilot, a temporary extra characteristic was added to the Municipal Fund specifically for municipalities with structural population decline (former programme leader population decline BZK, personal communication, 20 October 2023). This enabled the national government to distribute about 11 million euros per year over municipalities with declining populations in the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland (Platform31, n.d.).

In the first action plan, three regions were designated as *krimpgebieden* (shrinkage areas): Parkstad Limburg, Northeast Groningen, and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. However, more shrinking regions were expected in the coming years and the plan suggested that several regions should already start preparing for that future. In 2010, a second category of regions was therefore added to the policy: *anticipeergebieden* (anticipation areas). These regions should already start developing policies for expected population shrinkage well before that shrinkage would set in, to prevent unwanted effects like decreasing liveability, structural vacancy of housing and social infrastructure, and a reduction or loss of services (former programme leader population decline BZK, personal communication, 20 October 2023). Initially, 10 anticipation areas were designated. Later, because of regional lobbies and requests from Dutch parliament members and in response to evaluations of the first years of the first action plan, the total number of anticipation areas became 11 and the number of shrinkage areas was increased to nine (Figure 3). This also meant that the number of provinces involved in the action plan increased from three (Groningen, Limburg, Zeeland) to eight (adding Friesland, Drenthe, Gelderland, Noord-Holland, and Zuid-Holland).

In early 2010, the national government coalition fell. Soon afterwards, former Minister van der Laan became mayor of Amsterdam. He remained convinced that the largest cities of the Netherlands should show solidarity with regions facing structural shrinkage and initiated the programme *Amsterdam Verantwoordelijke Hoofdstad* ("Amsterdam Responsible Capital"). Amsterdam started a partnership with the municipalities of Delfzijl, Heerlen, and Sluis. The partnership consisted of, amongst others, study visits, masterclasses, exchanges of information and expertise, and cultural exchanges (Jansen & van der Wansem, 2017). This programme has continued under van der Laan's successor and still exists today (interview policy officer Province of Groningen, 6 October 2023; urban planner City of Amsterdam, personal communication, 17 October 2023).



**Figure 3.** Shrinkage regions (*krimpgebieden*) and anticipation regions (*anticipeergebieden*) in the Netherlands. Source: BZK (2019a).

The action plan emerged and evolved in times of fundamental economic, societal, and political change, which impacted the plan’s setup and implementation. The financial crisis of 2007–2009 gave a strong impetus to already ongoing trends of neoliberalisation and rescaling in the Dutch government and governance. The Dutch national government was radically reorganised by the right-wing coalition (VVD-CDA) taking office in 2010. A prominent victim of this reorganisation was the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment, which was abolished. Housing became part of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and spatial planning and environmental policy went to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment. This complicated the governance of the Action Plan: the plan was coordinated by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, but the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment and several other ministries were involved in the plan’s implementation too. The Dutch national government retreated in several policy fields and decentralised tasks and responsibilities to provinces, local governments, and other regional governance arrangements; and non-governmental actors and organisations were expected to take more responsibility in societal development. A “participatory society” was encouraged in which citizens were supposed to care for each other and to be more self-reliant and less state-dependent (Ubels et al., 2019).

The action plan was a dynamic plan that was frequently evaluated and adapted. Based on the experiences, steps were taken to formalise responsibilities and make actions at each level of governance involved more concrete. In 2012, the national government signed agreements with the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland to maintain and strengthen liveability and a vital economic structure in the shrinkage areas (Public Result, 2015). These agreements emphasised the multiscalar governance of the action plan once

more. Shrinkage areas also differed in their approach and learned from each other. In De Achterhoek for example, a region at the border with Germany in the province of Gelderland, shrinkage started later than in East Groningen and Zuid Limburg. Therefore, De Achterhoek did not have to go through the entire process from denial to acceptance that the other two regions had to go through. It also chose another governance arrangement, in which a more diverse set of actors including citizen groups were involved, in line with the development towards a “participatory society” (Beunen et al., 2020).

## 5. Second Population Decline Action Plan (2015–2019)

The first action plan was meant to set the agenda and increase consciousness of shrinkage as a structural problem. The second action plan (BZK, 2016) focused on programming and implementation. Though this plan was finalised and published in 2016, its implementation already started in 2015. The first collaboration agreements between the national government and some of the regions were already confirmed in 2015; other regions followed in 2016. Though the list of nine shrinkage areas and 11 anticipation areas (see Figure 3) was maintained, three anticipation areas chose not to be actively involved in this second action plan.

Next to attention to financial support and maintaining liveability and amenities, the specific policy themes of this action plan were housing, space and mobility, education, health care, economic vitality, and the labour market. Experiments were also still part of the action package, with a last round of experiments taking place between 2016 and 2019. Two “expertise trajectories” were organised about making the housing stock future-proof and about the chances and challenges of energy transition and climate adaptation. Five professors were asked to form the *Wetenschappelijke Reflectiegroep Bevolkingsdaling* (Scientific Reflection Group Population Decline–WRB). This group wrote five individual essays with different perspectives on the impacts of population decline and a collective plea with recommendations for future national and regional policies (BZK, 2019b). Financially, a significant change was that the pilot with the temporary extra characteristic in the Municipal Fund ended in 2015. It was replaced by temporary “decentralisation subsidies” for municipalities facing structural population decline and the provinces they were situated in, about 11 million per year from 2016 until 2022 (Platform31, n.d.).

Meanwhile, the political and institutional context had changed considerably. Because of reorganisations at the national government level and the decentralisation of government tasks to provinces and municipalities, the team involved in population decline policies was reduced from about 30 people at the start of the first action plan to about six people during the second action plan. As several interview respondents made clear, this went along with a loss of urgency. In the First Action Plan, population decline was still considered an issue of national concern; when the second action plan was developed, it had mainly become a regional and local issue instead (Beunen et al., 2020). This also changed relationships and task divisions between national, provincial, and municipal governments (interview former programme leader of the Population Decline Action Plan, 27 September 2023). Compared to the first action plan, the second action plan’s governance was less multiscalar, with less active involvement of the national government. The interview respondents from the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland recalled that contacts and meetings with national government policy officers became less frequent and that they could clearly notice that population decline and shrinkage lost priority. Moreover, at the provincial level, it was easier to agree on a common lobby and policy agenda with the three provinces involved at the start of the first action plan than with the eight provinces involved in the

later stages of the first and second action plan (interview policy officers Province of Zeeland, 25 September 2023). Parallel to this, as all interview respondents confirmed, the word *krimp* (shrinkage) gradually fell from grace at all government levels. This was partly because the population projections had changed; meanwhile, more and longer-lasting growth was expected at the national level and less dramatic and/or later decline in shrinking regions. One of the interview respondents stated that the projection makers “seemed to structurally overestimate the future problem.” In the 1990s and early 2000s, critical academics like Wim Derks were rather stating the opposite: according to them, the projections were underestimating the pace and extent of demographic change. Beyond the degree of realism of the projections, though, the discourse and the language used in it had also changed gradually. Terms like “shrinkage” and “decline” seemed to have been accepted in the action plans and the shrinkage discourse. Apparently, though, this acceptance was short-lived. A clear moment when this acceptance disappeared is hard to find, it was rather a gradual process. One of the interview respondents also pointed at a difference in acceptance between *krimp* (shrinkage), which was seen as too negative and suggesting a spiral downwards, and more “neutral” terms like population decline and ageing.

## 6. The End of National Population Decline Policy?

Though the final evaluation of the second action plan was positive about the results achieved in the shrinking and anticipating areas, it was much less positive about the role of the national government. The regions involved were critical of the lack of attention to specific circumstances and differences between regions and the lack of an integral approach across ministerial and departmental borders. Still, the regions and provinces involved asked for lasting attention to the impact of population decline: leaving the dominance of growth thinking, continuing knowledge exchange and development, and supporting and improving regional collaboration. Instead of a following specific population decline policy, they would prefer an integrated policy for the Netherlands as a whole in which all regions are equally important (van Iersel, 2021). A few years earlier, the WRB arrived at similar conclusions, advocating “a coherent growth and shrinkage policy” that would benefit the country as a whole: “We challenge the national government to perceive shrinkage and growth in coherence, with specific attention for equal regional opportunities” (BZK, 2019b, p. 116). Next to this, however, the final evaluation of the second action plan also made clear that better policies for border regions would be needed (van Iersel, 2021).

Meanwhile, new regional and urban policy programmes and instruments were introduced, which could also be seen as new forms of multiscale governance. This included a series of “deals”: “Regio Deals” for regions, “City Deals” for large and medium-sized cities, and “Town Deals” for smaller cities. Any Dutch region (for the “Regio Deals”), city, or town (for the “City Deals” and “Town Deals”) could submit a proposal in response to calls that the national government launched frequently. While each regional or local consortium should have had the same chance to be selected and funded, it was easier for growing and flourishing areas, especially for large city regions, than for stagnating or shrinking areas to submit a competitive proposal. Still, Parkstad Limburg and Achterhoek managed to apply successfully for a “Regio Deal.” The population decline team of the national government deliberately supported these regions in preparing their proposals, so shrinkage and population decline would still claim the attention they deserved in regional policies (interview former programme leader of the Population Decline Action Plan, 27 September 2023). Though “Regio Deals” were welcomed as a new opportunity to encourage regional development, several interview respondents indicated that such deals are too incidental and short-term (usually a few years) to really help stagnating or shrinking regions; they would rather see longer-term structural policy programmes.

The recently launched policy programme “*Regio’s aan de Grens*” (“Regions at the Border”) could be seen as a partial replacement of the Population Decline Action Plans. One of the recommendations of the evaluations discussed above was to give more attention to the specific challenges of border regions. Most of the shrinkage areas and anticipation areas are situated at or close to the borders with Germany and Belgium. However, an interview respondent currently involved in this programme made clear that the programme also includes regions elsewhere facing comparable challenges (interview former programme leader of the Population Decline Action Plan, 13 September 2023). The focus of this programme was unclear to the interview respondents from Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland. Though they appreciated the specific attention for border regions, they doubted whether this programme would be effective and how much priority it would get: There is not much funding available, the programme hardly connects to any other policies, and there is not much contact between the regions and the national government about this programme so far.

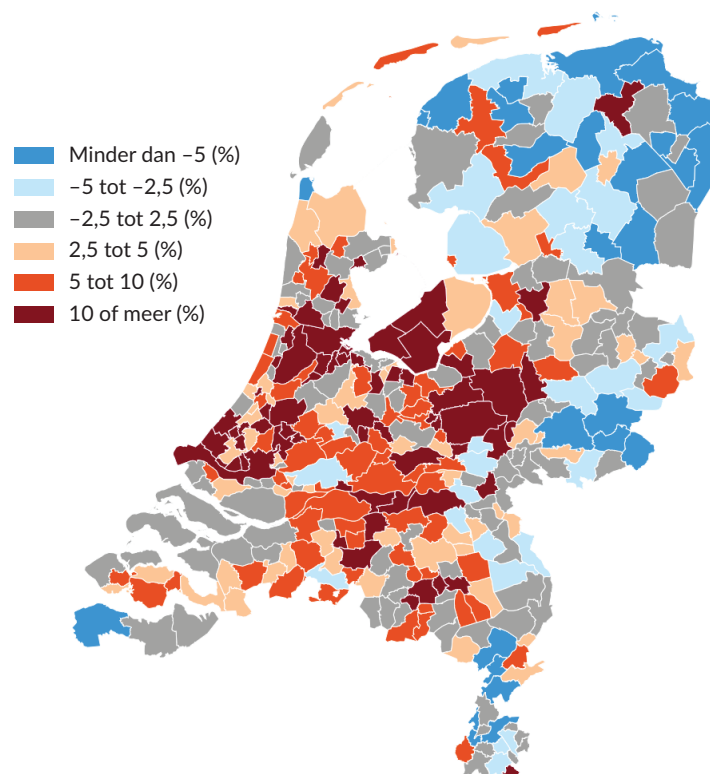
Some of the shrinkage and anticipation areas were impacted by crises and counterproductive policy responses beyond the population decline policies, making it more difficult to assess whether and to what extent the goals of the population decline policies were still realised. The most dramatic example of this is the impact of decades of gas extraction in the province of Groningen, resulting in a series of earthquakes causing substantial damage to many buildings. What caused even more damage though was the inability of the national government and the gas extracting companies to acknowledge the crisis and provide a proper programme of compensation and renovation to residents, also resulting in a growing distrust of government in the region. Verdoes and Boin (2021, p. 149) describe this as the “organised suppression of a creeping crisis.” Less dramatic, but also with substantial impact on regional development, was the plan to move the barracks of the Netherlands Marine Corps to Vlissingen, Zeeland. In response to the protest of many marines against this move from the middle of the country to what they saw as a peripheral location, the national government decided to move these barracks elsewhere instead. To compensate Vlissingen and Zeeland for this missed opportunity, an investment programme of about 650 million euros should create about 1,000 jobs in, amongst others, a court, a prison, a healthcare centre, and knowledge institutions (interview policy officers Province of Zeeland, 25 September 2023).

## 7. Conclusions and Future Perspectives: Moving Towards New Regional Policies?

In the Netherlands, shrinkage has mainly affected less urbanised areas at the edges of the country. Pioneering researchers and policy advisors like Wim Derks had already foreseen in the 1990s that this could become a structural trend in some Dutch regions, but they did not manage to convince relevant stakeholders that urgent action was required. In 2006, a discussion meeting of the Province of Limburg and a report by Derks and his colleagues (Derks et al., 2006) put shrinkage on regional and national policy and research agendas. More reports, meetings, and debates followed, initially mainly in the regions most affected in Limburg, Groningen, and Zeeland. The next breakthrough moment was when Minister van der Laan made shrinkage a national policy concern in 2009. This resulted in the first Population Decline Action Plan (BZK et al., 2009). While this plan mainly served to set the agenda and increase consciousness, the second action plan (BZK, 2016) was supposed to take the next steps towards programming and implementation. The analysis made clear that both plans had only partly achieved their goals. This was partly due to the plans themselves and how they were implemented, but probably more influential was the changing political and societal context. Related to this, the extent to which these plans really managed to establish an effective

multiscalar governance of shrinkage also decreased over time. The first action plan initially had such multiscalar governance ambitions. Its point of departure was that shrinkage, though only affecting parts of the country, should be seen as a national concern and as a matter of solidarity between growing and declining regions. However, already during the implementation of this plan, national government involvement and commitment declined; and this process continued during the second action plan. Eventually, at all governance scales, shrinkage and population decline lost urgency because (so far) they did not become as structural as expected, but they will probably reclaim a more prominent place on the national policy agenda soon. According to the most recent regional population projections, 15% of Dutch municipalities are expected to face structural population decline in the next decades. Most of those municipalities are (again) at the edges of the country, especially in the north (provinces of Friesland, Groningen, and Drenthe) and the southeast (province of Limburg; see PBL & CBS, 2022; see also Figure 4). Both action plans suffered from national government reorganisations, resulting in a much smaller “shrinkage team” to coordinate the action plans and less intensive and frequent contacts between regions and national government. Still, the interview respondents and experts like the WRB agree that the regions most affected remain vulnerable and deserve more policy attention.

In the coming years, new regional policies may partly still rely on programmes and instruments already introduced in recent years, like the “Regio Deals.” However, not only do the evaluations of the Population Decline Action Plans call for a different approach to regional development, but also several other analyses, policy advice, and debates in society and politics. One of the most recent pieces of influential policy advice was the report *Elke regio telt!* (*Every Region Counts!*). This report analysed regional differences and their



**Figure 4.** Projected population growth per municipality, 2021–2035. Notes: blue = decline; orange/red = growth; grey = stable or slight growth/decline. Source: PBL and CBS (2022).

causes, using 'broad prosperity' as the main indicator, and how people in those regions experience those differences. In this report, "broad prosperity" is defined as "comprising everything that people consider valuable: not only the spendable income, but also, for example, health, education, ecology and living environment, social connectedness, personal development and safety" (Rli et al., 2023, p. 6). The authors concluded that in the past decades, the Dutch national government has made wrong choices in its regional policy.

The assumption that increasing wealth and growth in the strongest regions is beneficial for the whole country appeared to be false: The disadvantaged regions remained as disadvantaged as they were or even became more disadvantaged. Several of the insights of this analysis reflected debates about perceived growing differences between a prosperous Randstad (the most urbanised part of the Netherlands, consisting of the metropolitan regions of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht) and the rest of the country, and a perceived growing distance between national government and regions in terms of misunderstanding regional problems, regions feeling "passed by," underinvestment, etc. The authors warned that such perceptions could also contribute to a decline in trust in the national government. Therefore, they recommended radical changes in regional policies: a fundamental reorientation of the regional policy and investment logic towards broad prosperity for the country as a whole; a shift from short-term incentives to long-term structural development programmes; and revitalising the relations between regions and national government (Rli et al., 2023). In March 2024, a letter from the Minister of Interior Affairs to the parliament announced the next steps towards a new regional policy logic in line with this advice (de Jonge, 2024).

In July 2023, the Dutch national government fell, only 1.5 years after it took office. In the national elections of November 2023, resulting in a landslide victory of the far-right populist party PVV and an impressive entry of the new centre-right party NSC, the Dutch political landscape changed radically. At the moment of finalising this article (May 2024), negotiations about a new governing coalition were still ongoing. Regardless of the new coalition governing the country, regional policies will probably change and broad prosperity will become a key priority in these policies. Contrasts in regional demographic development have a substantial impact on regional inequalities in broad prosperity, so the new regional policies will have to take such contrasts into account. Apart from this, we may also soon see a new national-level population policy related to the recently published report of the State Committee Demographic Developments 2050. This State Committee compared three demographic scenarios: fast growth, moderate growth, and stagnation or decline. It recommended moderate growth as the scenario offering the best prospects for broad prosperity in the coming decades (Staatscommissie Demografische Ontwikkelingen 2050, 2024).

Recent and future changes in Dutch regional policies and population policies are related to many other policy fields and their political and legal frameworks, which are fundamentally changing as well. From a spatial planning perspective, two recent changes should be highlighted here. First, since early 2022, the Netherlands has had a Minister of Housing and Spatial Planning again, after an absence of 12 years. However, this did not yet mean the return of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment that was abolished in 2010. Will the new coalition also have such a minister again, and will this minister then get his or her own ministry? This could make a substantial difference in the governance, objectives, and instruments of future regional population policies. Second, after many years of delay, the *Omgevingswet* (Environment and Planning Act) was finally introduced in January 2024. This law has changed the objectives, instruments, and responsibilities in the Dutch planning system fundamentally. Anticipating this new legal



planning framework, national-level spatial planning has already returned with the National Environmental Vision NOVI (2020) and its further elaboration in the NOVEX programme (2022–2023). It is too early to estimate how this may impact future regional policies, but the new legal framework of the *Omgevingswet* may offer good opportunities to connect the policy and planning discourses about planning for shrinkage and planning for degrowth. It may also offer new opportunities to achieve a more effective and truly multiscalar governance of shrinkage in the Netherlands.

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