

## Emptiness and space

### On population decline and quality of life in the north of the Netherlands

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Bettina B. Bock

### Introduction

The Netherlands is a densely populated and highly urbanised country: one that, according to many international definitions, barely has any 'real' countryside. Those who only know the Randstad may well agree. But those who come from the north, east or south of the Netherlands know that this does not tell the whole story. The Netherlands also has rural areas, villages and a rural culture, beautifully described by Geert Mak (1996). It even has some 'remote' rural areas that face problems of population decline and viability similar to those that exist elsewhere in the world, although the intensity may differ. Distances are much smaller in the Netherlands than elsewhere in Europe and the population density of rural areas is still relatively high. This, however, does not mean that remoteness does not exist in the Netherlands; it just confirms that the Dutch experience of full and empty spaces is different from elsewhere.

Space is a central theme in Hendrik Marsman's poem 'Herinnering aan Holland' (Memories of Holland) in which he paints an image of 'endless low lands' and of farms 'sunken in great space'. Space – not emptiness, space for views – perhaps space for homesickness as well – because he wrote this poem during a stay abroad. Marsman was born in Zeist and lived in Utrecht and Rotterdam for many years, which are now densely populated areas with little left of the space he describes. At that time, 1936, life in the Netherlands was undoubtedly much less busy, but it is remarkable that when he thought of the Netherlands he thought of its space, which both inspired and intrigued him.

The current discussion on shrinkage is not about space, but emptiness. Emptiness that results from emigration: empty houses, empty stores and schools, and empty stables and farms: an emptiness that is threatening and scary.

My story is about both space and emptiness: about the emptiness that remains when people leave and services disappear, but also about the space for renewal and change that arises as a result of this. It is also about a change in perspective – how emptiness can become precious space and how we can discover new possibilities if we view population decline from the perspective of increasing mobility.

My address is structured as follows:

1. I will start by outlining the problems around population decline and viability;
2. I will then go further into two topics that clarify my perspective as a sociologist: social and territorial inequality and space and mobility.
3. Finally, I will talk about what I hope to do in the coming years at this University.

## Population decline and viability

The Netherlands currently has nine 'shrinking areas' where both the population and the number of households is declining. There are also eleven designated 'anticipatory areas' where the number of households is expected to remain stable, but the population is expected to decline (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2015). The overall population of the Netherlands is expected to decline starting in 2030 unless immigration from abroad remains high and outpaces natural population decline and emigration (CPB/PBL, 2015). In that sense, the whole of the Netherlands, is an 'anticipation region', as, perhaps, is even the whole of Europe – with the exception of the big cities and urban spaces. Population decline in the Netherlands goes hand in hand with urbanisation – the migration of mainly young and educated people to the big cities, particularly 'the West', the provinces of North and South Holland, Utrecht and Flevoland (CPB/PBL, 2015).

Population decline is the result of what is called demographic transition – a shift from high to low death and birth rates, generally brought about by improved nutrition, living conditions, health services and social security. As a result of these influences people tend to live longer and have fewer children.

Sociologists speak of the current epoch as a time of modernisation, in which material changes in people's lifestyles and welfare are accompanied by changes in opinions about the 'right way to live'. These less tangible changes include an increase in secularisation and individualisation, which reflect the increasing value that we assign to independence and personal development. Giddens (1990) describes the current era as 'radicalised modernity' in which self-fulfilment becomes an increasingly central goal in life. More than ever before, to succeed in society, one needs to develop oneself to the fullest extent and not blindly accept the status quo. In line with this trend rural youth increasingly chooses to pursue higher education, and rural dwellers (following their urban counterparts) increasingly tend not to marry (or to marry later), to divorce and/or to have no or fewer children. The cumulative effects of these changes hits some areas sooner and harder than others, and often have the most impact in areas with an initially small population. Equally, one might say that rural depopulation is the (perhaps unintentional) effect of policy, the geographical location of institutes of higher education, government institutions and companies. If the 'best' education is to be found in the cities, young people will want to move there. If that is also where the best jobs are, they are less likely to return.

Currently, around 8% of the Dutch population lives in these so-called diminishing areas. The number of citizens in these areas is expected to decline by around 19% by 2030 (Provincie Groningen et al., 2016), while the proportion of elderly people (over the age of 65) in these areas is expected to increase to more than a third of the population (CBS statline regional prognoses).

Population decline therefore not only means a decrease in population. More importantly, it also means a change in the population's composition in terms of age, education and income. As time progresses the rural population is increasingly differentiated from the national population, with a higher average age, a lower level of education, lower income and more people unemployed and unfit for work. This is already the case in some areas, in others it is anticipated to occur in the coming years. If this trend does not change it will mean a further ageing of the rural population, with the higher number of citizens over the age of 65 becoming a higher percentage of elderly over the age of 80 with implication for health and social care provision.

Distances are relatively small in the Netherlands and, although the number of facilities in villages has decreased in the past decades, people in most rural areas can generally find basic facilities within reasonable distances, especially compared to other countries. For most Dutch rural dwellers, stores,

doctors, primary education and even secondary education are accessible by car (within 10 km) (CBS statline nabijheid voorzieningen). Yet, lack of accessibility is still a cause for concern, first of all for groups who (no longer) have a car or driver's licence (specifically the elderly). Secondly, there is the question of whether accessibility is just a matter of spatial distance, or whether we should look at how it is perceived subjectively, and therefore, differently. The acceptable distance to travel to school and/or work will be shorter for those with a lower education level. Different age groups may perceive the distance to facilities in different ways according to their access to transport and cost. Transport costs money, and, dependence on the help of others creates social obligation. In both instances, we can identify groups who will be particularly vulnerable in the future: the elderly, the sick and those on a low income and/or with a low level of education (De Vries et al., 2017). These are the groups that are especially overrepresented in the 'diminishing areas' (see RIVM 2015/2016).

The disappearance of facilities is often connected to a loss of quality of life, or what in Dutch is called 'liveability'. Liveability is a hard to define term (Thissen, 2008). It concerns both the available prerequisites for living a good life as well as the experienced quality of life. As such it encompasses both objective characteristics of the environment and personal, subjective experiences of it. The 'liveability' (or viability) of the Dutch countryside has long been the subject of study (see for example Bomars and Hidding, 1997; De Roo and Thissen 1997; Bock, Derkzen and Joosse, 2004) often as a result of concern about the decrease in facilities. The attention given to health and lifestyle adds a new element to these studies (CMO Stamm, 2015). This can partly be explained by the overall increase in attention to health issues and partly to the relatively poor health situation in diminishing and anticipation areas (RIVM, 2014 & 2015).

The concept is often used to evaluate the vitality of villages (Thissen, 2008) including such factors as the quality of people's social relationships and citizens' engagement with their local community. Studies such as these can be interpreted by sociologists in terms of degrees of social cohesion and the size and distribution of social capital, which provides an important reminder that it is about more than facilities and that it is also rooted in a sense of community, participation in collective activities and mutual care.

It is beyond dispute that social cohesion and collective self-reliance are important to the quality of life in the countryside. According to Mak (1996; 146) it is one of the components of a rural culture that historically made it possible to survive outside of the reach of urbanised services and which even remained a feature when everyone started to go to the Miro (supermarket chain) in Leeuwarden for their groceries. There were tasks which were self-evidently organised in the community, such as organising the annual fair and the burial of Folkert<sup>1</sup> In the village of Jorwert local residents recently took the initiative to convert their village hall into accommodations for refugees. This type of communal effort by citizens can be found in many villages, whether in decline, anticipated to do so or 'holding their own'. When village halls are under threat of closure because of budget cuts, volunteers jump in and take over from governmental and commercial partners. Elsewhere they manage swimming pools and sports fields, keep shops and schools open, and even build residences. So does this mean that everything is alright? Are rural citizens able to take care of themselves in the same way that they have for centuries?

Collective participation of villagers runs through the ages, but the meaning changes with the societal context. Research shows that collective action is more successful in some villages than others

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to one of the characters in the book of Gert Mak. It has been translated and published in English by The Harvill Press in 2000, titled 'Jorwerd'. Jorwerd is a small village in the province of Fryslan in the North of the Netherlands. The book tells us about how rural life changed between 1950 and 2000.

(Vermeij, 2015). This has to do with the strength of relationships, the number of people willing and able to work and the presence of 'instigators' with inspiration, drive, experience and a network of relationships within and outside the village (Grootens & Horling, 2016; Kroehn et al., 2010). These studies show that the conditions are more likely to be fulfilled in villages located close to a city, with a relatively high viability and a relatively large number of highly educated citizens. Although there are not currently differences in participation between villages with or without facilities or with a stable or a declining population, the studies warn that continuing population decline will put pressure on the collective resilience of the villages in due course. We can expect that the peripheral, less well located villages will be less resilient than others.

There is another complicating factor. The need for regional solutions that go beyond the needs of individual villages is most pronounced in diminution and anticipation areas. Yet most residents' initiatives focus on the maintenance of their own village (Vermeij, 2015). If we are to rely on the self-reliance of residents in diminishing communities, those with better starting condition may probably be more successful leaving more fragile communities behind. It is questionable if this will result in the fairest distribution of services and facilities from a regional point of view. This underlines the importance for collective thinking, from government, citizens, companies and social organisations, to identify the most urgent challenges, potential solutions and who might undertake the tasks identified. International research has shown that the capacity, of all those involved, to think outside the box and to set conventions aside is of great importance here (Bock, 2016; Bruckmeier & Tovey, 2008; Wals, 2007).

Expectations about 'bottom-up' initiatives are often high (Bosworth et al, 2015). The hope is that these initiatives will lead to social innovation – the development of new ideas and practices that safeguard mutual care for each other as the welfare state falters (Bock, 2012; 2016). It is clear that this will not be easy or spontaneous. It requires knowledge and competence, courage and trust, and a lot of time and patience, from all involved.

Bottom up initiatives also give rise to unease and discussions about the implications of replacing public facilities with private ones and formal procedures with informal ones (Deeming, 20016; Broese van Groenou & De Boer, 2016). We have become accustomed to having facilities and services being provided in a uniform manner and to the state guaranteeing (a basic minimum level of) welfare for all. A system build on citizen's initiatives is, by definition, heterogeneous. While this is to be expected (facilities tailored to local contexts are likely to be more appropriate and effective), it also means there will be variability in the shape and cost of the available services, and who is eligible for them. This is a fundamental change in the system that could exacerbate social inequality and social isolation, and which requires new safeguards to guarantee access to essential facilities for everyone.

Inequality, both between social groups and places, is an important underlying driver of population decline and rural marginalisation. It is part of what is also indicated as territorial inequality, one of the themes that fascinates me as a sociologist.

### Territorial Inequality

Almost all the diminution and anticipation areas are located in border regions, at the edge of the Netherlands, which is why a number of researchers have dubbed them 'Randland' (Borderland) (Meier, Reverda & van der Wouw, 2015). This is an interesting wordplay on the term 'Randstad' ('Bordercity')<sup>2</sup>. The Randland is mostly rural, definitely not urban, and is located at the periphery,

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Randstad' is used to indicate the Dutch metropolitan area in the West of the country including primarily the cities Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht. It is the most densely populated part of

perhaps a shared feature, since the Randstad is also located at the border. But while, as an alderman from Parkstad Limburg noted on an excursion the Randstad borders the sea, the diminution areas of the Netherlands border Belgium and Germany, other densely populated countries and (potential) markets.

'Randland' can, therefore, be seen as a term of strength, leading our attention to the dynamics and innovation potential of the regions. There is much truth in this, because in these areas there is much willingness from the population and governments to work to maintain the quality of life. However, it is important to recognise that the existence of diminution and anticipation areas is part of a process of increasing territorial inequality between prosperous central areas and less prosperous areas on the periphery.

This increasing territorial inequality contrasts with the aim for more territorial cohesion, one of the goals of the European Union since its founding (Saraceno, 2013). Various state policies and tools have attempted to secure the quality of life for everyone in Europe, regardless of location (EC, 2004 p. 27; Faludi, 2013 p. 1304), yet the failures of these initiatives has become increasingly visible in the past years. Several recent studies show that inequality has increased, especially since the financial crisis (Bock, Kovacs and Shucksmith, 2015; Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014). Two types of areas have been shown to be the most vulnerable in Europe: areas with antiquated or closed industries (such as the Ruhr or the region around Heerlen) and relatively isolated rural areas in mountain areas, on islands or along international borders.

A similar process is happening in the Netherlands. Studies from the Scientific Council for Government Policy in 2014 show increasing segregation and even polarisation between socio-economically strong and weaker groups (Kremer et al., 2014). Education has become the most decisive characteristic. High and low education groups differ in terms of their incomes and job security, their health and life expectancy, their expectations for the future, their optimism and in their trust in politics and government (Boven et al., 2014). Other studies show this inequality to be becoming more spatially pronounced. Groups with more or less 'capital', in the sense of income, education, social status and health live in different houses, neighbourhoods, cities and parts of the Netherlands (Tudoir et al., 2015; Vrooman et al., 2014; de Voogd, 2013; see also Ruimtevolk, 2015). This is how the population in the peripheral 'Randland' is becoming different from the population in central urban and rural areas in the Netherlands (Pommer et al., 2016). We have only looked at this development from a demographic perspective and even from this perspective it seems to be a development that is hard to reverse.

'Territorial inequality' offers a different perspective because it focuses on the political processes that determine the relative position and wealth of regions. In 'Decentering the nation: a radical approach to regional inequality' Ash Amin, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift (2003) explain that centralisation in Britain structurally benefits London and the South East region because of the investments in infrastructure, knowledge, culture and the founding of businesses in this area. This is presented as being in the national interest, with 'the centre' being the 'motor of the country', without recognition that this policy actually structurally benefits one region at the expense of the others, which are deemed to lack capacity and/or be unfavourably located.

These findings are not directly translatable to the Dutch context, yet they should inspire us to ask new questions. These might include the following.

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the country and home to the government. Amsterdam, for instance, is attracting 10.000 new residents every year, most of which are young, highly educated and moving there from other parts of the country.

1. Is regional (instead of national) governance of population decline really the most effective way forward, taking into account that national policies continue to promote urbanisation, and hence population growth in the centre and decline in the periphery?
2. Does this policy lead to the isolation of diminution and anticipation areas and to them being regarded as remote, empty, less dynamic and separate from the more developed, urban Netherlands?
3. Does this explain the emphasis laid on the individual responsibility of diminution areas and provinces and the lack of regard for shared responsibility, connection and solidarity?
4. Why is there no policy that integrally and cohesively addresses population decline and urbanisation?
5. Would such a policy lead to more attention being paid to what these areas have (valuable space) and less on what they lack (their emptiness)?

These questions highlight the political character of the processes we are looking at. Neither population decline, nor its consequences for the quality of life in rural areas for those who remain, are iron laws of nature. We need to look more closely at the dynamics that connect developments in the Randland and the Randstad: the linkages between growth and diminution.

Amin, Massey and Thrift argue that regional inequality can only be combatted by policy that stimulates polycentric development, on founding several developmental centres, in different parts of the country. They see this as bringing benefits to the country as a whole and a way of preventing the 'overheating' of existing growth areas. In the Netherlands, there are also signs that the growth of the Randstad is reaching its limits and is creating pressures on people's quality of life. At this moment solutions to this problem are being sought within the Randstad through, for example, more collaboration between the big cities. The larger cities realise that stimulating development in a neighbouring city can also serve the wellbeing of their own citizens, a polycentric policy on a small scale. The Randstad is almost one big city: distances are small and mobility high, which could make such a policy easier to operate (Tordoir et al., 2015). Could this approach be applied to the whole of the Netherlands with people commuting and moving more and the population in all regions becoming more fluid and flexible, with areas linked through spread out social networks (Argent, 2016)?

This brings me to my second subject: space and mobility, and the implications of mobility for the future of diminution areas.

### Space and mobility

Famous sociologists such as Castells (2000) and Urry (2007) have described the present as the age of mobility. The declining costs of transport and new possibilities of ICT make it easier for people to travel, work and live in different places. There are also counterarguments. Braidotti et al. (2013) and Bauman (2000) warn that the freedom to travel is mainly a privilege of the elite and (relative) immobility is emerging as a new form of social exclusion.

The critical note of Braidotti and Bauman adds nuance to the ode to mobility without denying its importance. Mobility changes our perspective on the importance of distance and also shows how futile it is to try to keep people in one place and to persuade them to stay there. Perhaps it would be more effective to support mobility, especially for those groups whose mobility is limited. It might also be time to accept the temporality of residence. Mobility does not just make it easier to leave, it also makes it easier to come back. All citizens are, in a sense, temporary and this is not an obstacle for their involvement and them taking initiatives.

I think mobility offers opportunities to secure the viability of the more remote regions but to appreciate this we need to look beyond what we have come to see as the 'permanent citizen'. Mobility unlocks the valuable space of remote areas for people from the outside and makes it possible for people from remote areas to gain access to external networks that can support development in those areas. Mobility creates opportunity for connections, between the centre and the periphery, a connection that can provide a base for solidarity and bridging the divide (Bock, 2016).

### Work programme

The professorship for population decline and viability in the north of the Netherlands has a working remit for a five year period. I would like to use this time to further study the process of population decline and contribute to the maintenance of viability.

During this time I would like to develop cohesion between the following three subjects: the functioning of citizens' initiatives, the role of mobility and the meaning of social and territorial inequality. I will address each subject briefly and the steps that have been taken in these areas in the past year.

#### *a. From citizens' initiatives to social innovation*

I have previously explained that citizens' initiatives provide an indispensable contribution to the viability of the countryside. Yet, we still know relatively little about the conditions required for the emergence and success of citizens' initiatives in diminution areas. I would like to use research to generate more insights into the following questions: Under what circumstances do citizens' initiatives blossom? How effective can they be, and in respect to which problems? What are the limits on this process and how can it be supported, for instance through external collaboration? To what extent do citizens' initiatives in diminution areas differ from those in other areas and cities? And, what are the experiences in other countries?

In my opinion, it is also important to understand when and how citizen initiatives can contribute to social innovation and therefore offer solutions that reach beyond their own village and beyond the maintenance of what already exists. Citizens cannot establish social innovations by themselves. It requires collaboration with the government, social organisations and, often, companies. These types of collaboration are often experienced as problematic as these different types of organisation have very different ways of working. I would like to use research to better understand when, and under which circumstances, citizens' initiatives can grow into social innovations and how this process is supported or disrupted by the government and other partners.

Research into this subject is ongoing and I am happy to be collaborating with colleagues from the University of Groningen on this: colleagues such as Tialda Haartsen and Hiska Ubels who are studying social innovation in diminution areas with specific attention to the role of government. I am also involved in two projects on healthcare innovation in diminution areas in collaboration with the GGD (Jan Bleker and Sandra van Assen). Finally, with Chantal Robbe of the PAS Bureau and Lumina Horlings of the University of Groningen, I am setting up a study that compares the development of citizens' initiatives and their support needs in diminution areas and cities.

#### *b. Mobility as prerequisite and opportunity*

Mobility is an important subject in the framework of diminution because it shines a light on one of the most important causes of population decline: the migration of young adults. Mobility also puts the importance we attribute to a permanent residence into perspective by emphasising how our stays are often temporary. Temporary citizens can also strengthen viability, as shown by the role



newcomers often play. I would like to use research to further highlight the importance of mobility for regions facing population decline, the role of mobile and former citizens and the chances that mobility offers for collaboration beyond borders.

I would also like to better understand the meaning of mobility for young adults, and here I will build upon previous research in the north of the Netherlands (Thissen et al., 2010). I wish to find out how the decisions of young adults about whether to leave or stay is made in interaction with others and the extent to which mobility is perceived as a prerequisite for 'getting on'. At the moment I am in discussion with the three northern provinces, the province of Gelderland and colleagues in Limburg and Zeeland to set up such a study.

### *c. Social and territorial inequality*

I have already emphasised the importance of considering the problem of population decline and viability from the perspective of increasing territorial inequality. Yet, there is hardly any research available on this matter. In my opinion, it is important to chart the process of increasing segregation, to see to what extent that policies may (inadvertently) reinforce this process and the willingness of decision makers to adopt measures to counteract territorial segregation. I am currently developing an idea for such a study. As part of a large international comparative research project into territorial inequality in Europe, Tialda Haartsen, Dirk Strijker and I plan to investigate, over the next five years, the extent to which we can assess the socioeconomic and politic status of a region by the size and direction of migration and mobility. The focus of this study will be to assess how European, national and regional policy can contribute to counteracting increasing territorial inequality.

As previously stated, it is important to regard all three subjects in cohesion. In such a way insights into the factors that influence the success of citizens' initiatives will also increase our understanding of the processes that drive increased territorial inequality. Similarly, mapping the choices that young adults in rural areas make about whether to stay or leave can show how they perceive the viability of different areas. Ultimately, this interlinked programme is about better understanding how population decline and viability are connected and how, and for whom, chances and problems originate. This is why I value comparative research: it helps us see the similarities and differences in diminution areas in the North, in the Netherlands and in other countries. In my opinion, we can learn a lot from each other. We can marvel when we see patterns repeating themselves, and see our situation anew once we see what happens elsewhere.

This research should yield insights and information that is applicable, and contributes, to the maintenance of viability. To this end, it is important to collaborate from the onset with all those involved. In the North, the establishment of the Kennisnetwerk Krimp Noord Nederland (diminution knowledge network of the north Netherlands) is a good foundation for achieving this goal.

### *In conclusion*

It has been said before that we have to look for opportunities in diminution. It is true but much easier said than done. Still, this is also a plea for a different view of diminution, a plea to think in space instead of emptiness. Because space is a scarce and valuable commodity in the Netherlands, valuable in the sense of precious as well. Space for nature, for agriculture, and for culture. Space to escape the bustle of the city. Space for silence, space to stare. Not emptiness but space, as space for chance and innovation, for experiments, art and new enterprises. Space to share and space to live, permanently or not. I hope that this research group can contribute to a preservation of space to offer a high quality of life in the North of the Netherlands.

I have spoken.

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