

Innovative planning method for shrinking rural regions

Riga, 5 December 2025

Kjell Overvåg, professor

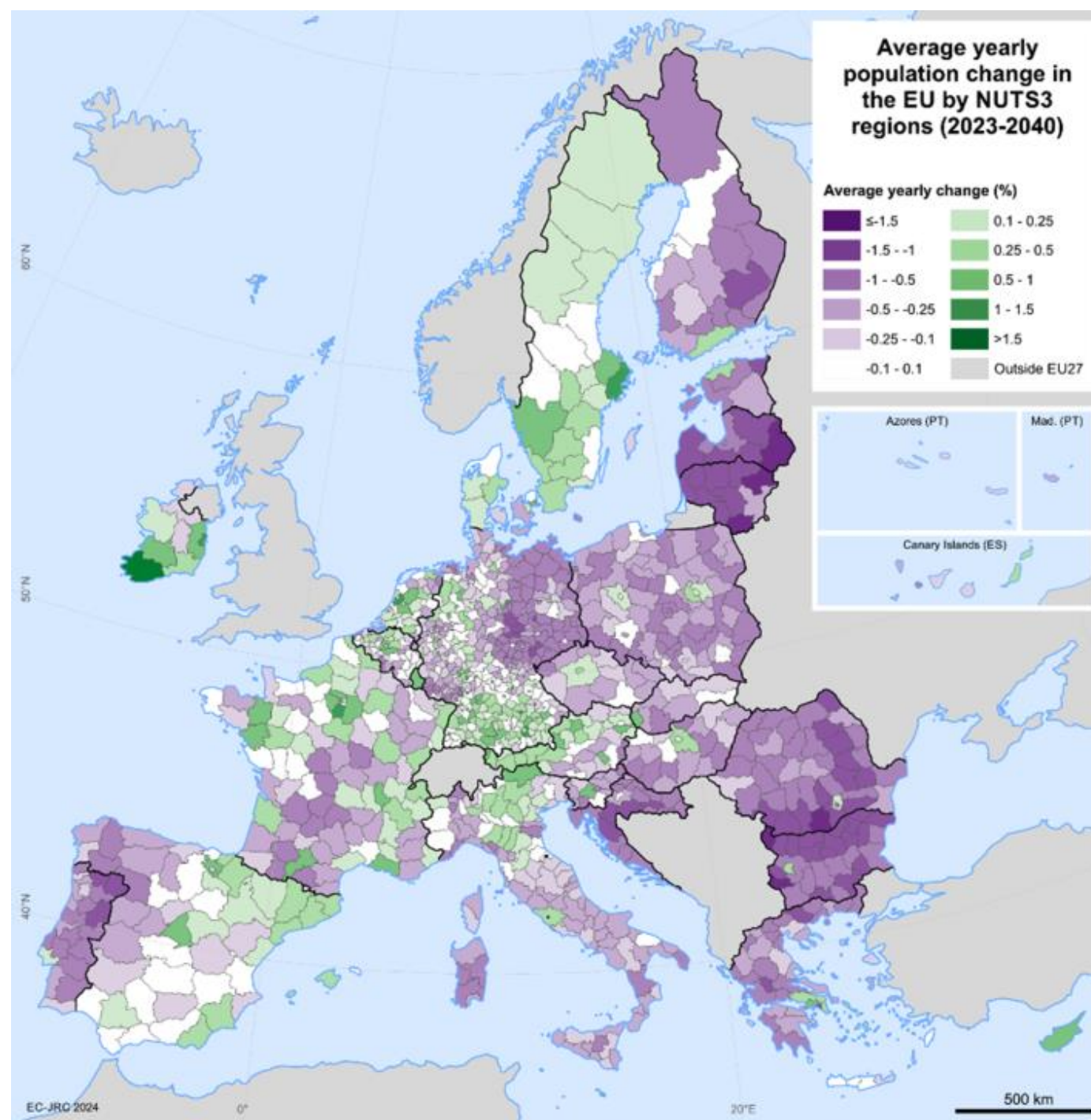
What is RURALPLAN?

A new method for local societal planning was developed in order to

- safeguard that demographic changes were addressed adequately
- to promote innovative solutions to handle demographic changes
- to ensure local participation, co-creation, place-based solutions

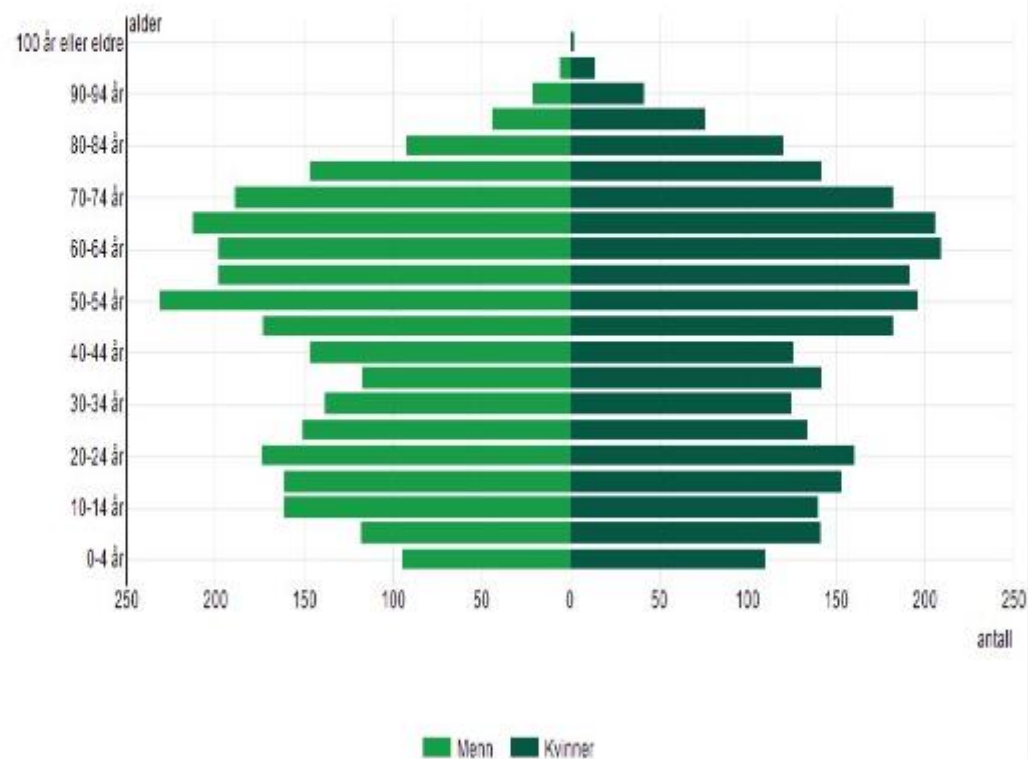
This method is labelled **RUPIL** (RUral Planning and Innovation Lab)

Tested in three rural municipalities in Norway, Sweden and Switzerland in 2024.



Age structure: from pyramid to «stabbur»

07459: Befolkning, etter kjønn og alder. Personer, Sel, 2023.



Kilde: Statistisk sentralbyrå



Av [Marion Godager Tveter](#).
Lisens: [CC BY NC SA 3.0](#)

Responses to demographic changes in local planning and politics

Hospers (2018)

- Trivialization
- Countering
- Accepting-adapting
- Utilizing

«Hybrid-responses» (Hagen et al. 2022)

Unwillingness to realize/address the issue.

Stigma – feeling of “loosing”

Existing theories, models, practices: **growth-oriented**

Planning to meet challenges in shrinking rural regions. Towards innovative approaches to local planning

AKSEL HAGEN, ULLA HIGDEM AND KJELL OVERVÅG



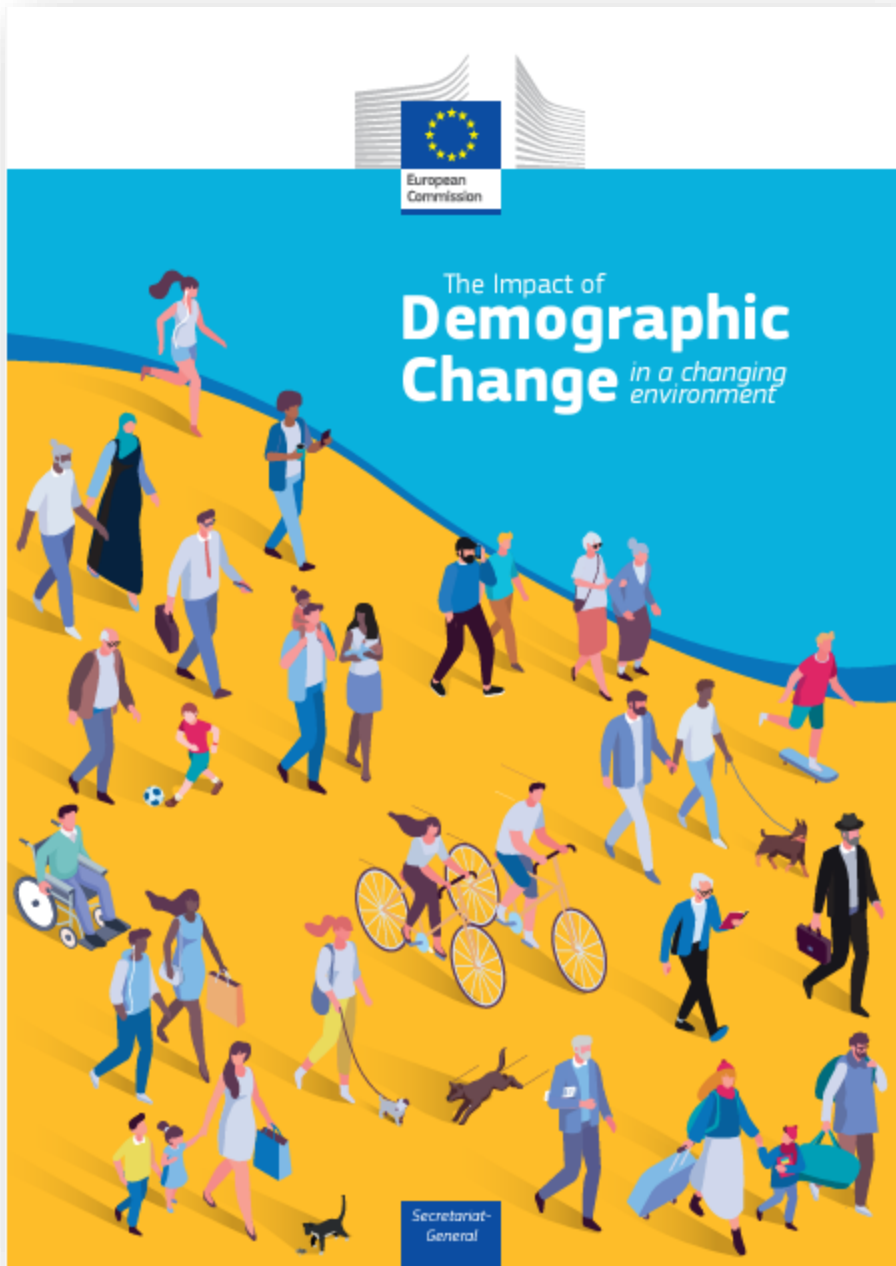
Hagen, A., Higdem, U & Overvåg, K. (2022) Planning to meet challenges in shrinking rural regions. Towards innovative approaches to local planning. *Fennia* 200(2) 175–190. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.119752>




In this article we ask to what extent is current demographic development reflected in the present planning and policy practice of shrinking municipalities; whether there is a focus on strategies and measures for population growth; and, finally, to what extent do politicians and planners think we should change the way we plan based on the expected demographic changes. Our study illustrates how challenging it is for shrinking municipalities to break with established practices and modes of policy development and to adopt a more sustainable position. The 'stigma' of shrinking (Sousa & Pinho 2015) is at odds with the ideals of the local politicians. However, we find that the response in planning and policy is not uniform: several responses may appear simultaneously and connected to different parts of the societal (master) development plans, thus, making the plans incoherent and contradictory. Hence, we contribute

Municipal plans in Innlandet (Norway):

- 20 of 31 shrinking municipalities have population growth as a goal in the coming years
- A few have population stabilization as a goal
- Few problematize the gap between population development and their own goals for growth.
- Adaptation strategy regarding services such as kindergartens, schools and elderly care.
- There is no connection between the sector plans with adaptation and the municipal master plans with growth.



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Demographic change in regions and cities

Many places in the OECD face declining and ageing populations. This trend will continue. 14 OECD countries are expecting to lose population by 2040. In some regions this trend will be lasting and strong, with some projected to lose 20% or more of their population by 2050. Strong population shrinkage brings challenges that are best addressed at the regional and local level. For example, the costs of services and infrastructure provision rise per person, while quality and access risks declining. Affected regions typically struggle with labour and skill shortages, deteriorating real estate values, eroding tax bases and vacant buildings. The effects vary across regions: while people often migrate from rural to urban regions, some cities and towns are also affected by population decline. Local policies, delivered with national support, are necessary to foster well-being, economic and environmental sustainability. They need to cover government finances, infrastructure and service provision as well as multilevel governance.

Policy sub-issue

Key links

[Shrinking Smartly and Sustainably Flyer >](#)
[Shrinking Smartly in Estonia >](#)



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RURALPLAN - Innovative planning in shrinking societies

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Planning for Shrinkage: Paradox or Paradigm

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(Received April 2011; accepted November 2011)

ABSTRACT A great number of contributions regarding shrinking cities correspond to generic discourses on urban problems, which cover planning policies with approaches and strategies developed in somewhat diverse or even very different urban contexts. The debate on shrinkage is still feeble and fragmented. Perhaps this is owing to the character of shrinkage or its relative novelty. An explicit, unequivocal, and comprehensive theoretical debate and framework on the topic of planning for shrinkage is lacking. This entails a previous reflection about what shrinkage means or should mean, the role of urban and regional planning, and the contradictions of planning for shrinkage, which cause the paradox of planning for shrinkage. How can planning deal with shrinkage? What should policies for shrinkage look like? Is planning for shrinkage, planning for population decrease? Is it managing population decrease? Is it business as usual: planning to resume growth? What does managing shrinkage mean? The paper presents a theoretical debate and some preliminary conclusions addressing these questions.



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Vol. 200 No. 2 (2022): Depopulation and shrinkage in a northern context: geographical perspectives, spatial processes, and policies

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EDITORIALS

[Depopulation and shrinkage in a Northern context: geographical perspectives, spatial processes and policies](#)

Moritz Albrecht, Maija Halonen, Josefina Syssner

91–97

Recommendations for local planning

(from research and earlier projects)

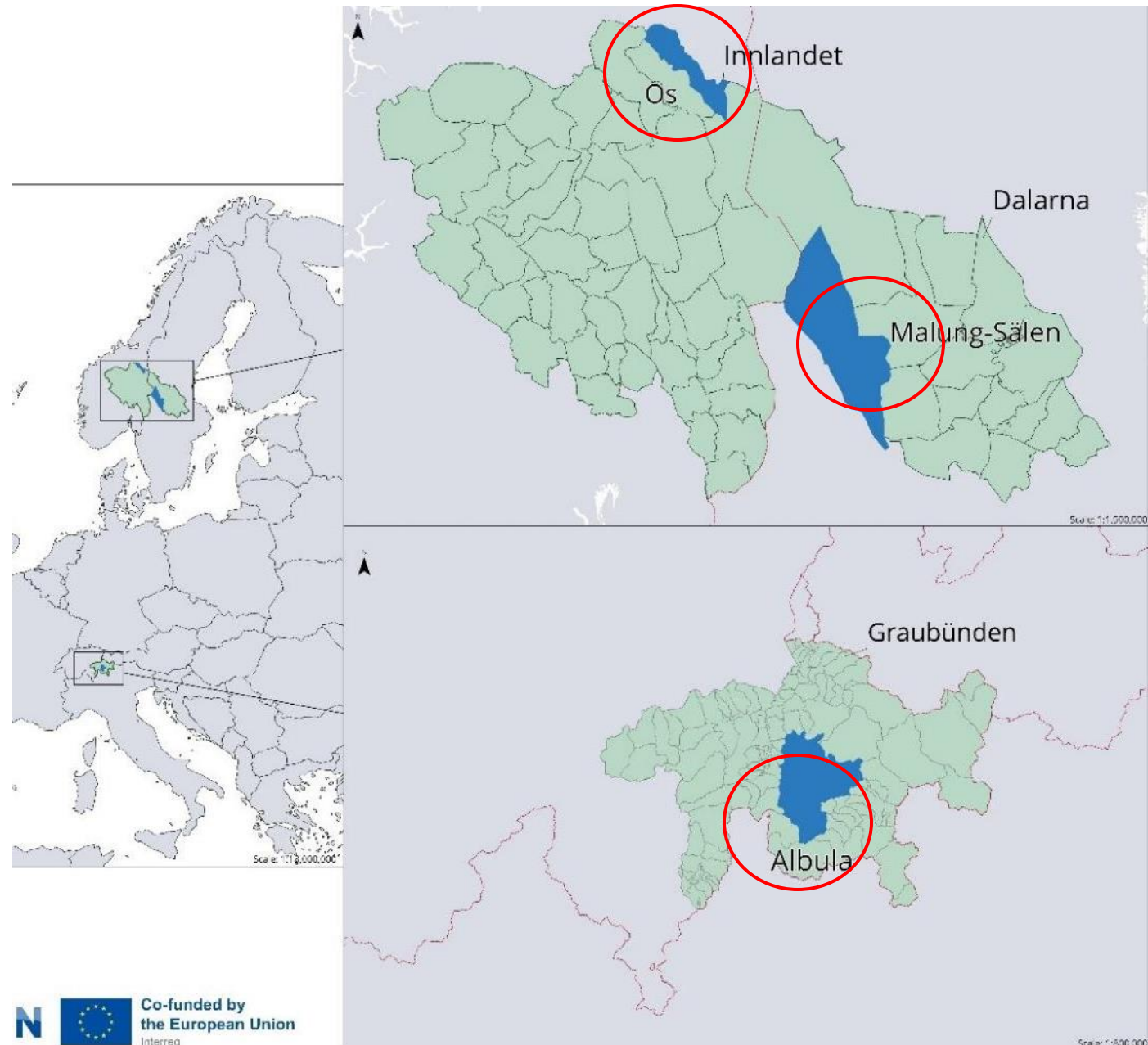
- Accept the demographic changes – included them as a central part of the planning process at all levels (“realistic planning” – “evidence based planning”)
- Innovation (in planning and in solutions) and rural transformation needed to meet challenges
- Decoupling shrinkage from failure
- Development and “success” – more than population growth (quality of life, well-being, inclusion, natural environment, entrepreneurs, etc.). Develop new types of goals/strategies
- Citizen engagement and co-creation important –democracy/legitimacy
- Collaboration between sectors, levels, etc. (multi-level governance)

; a need to develop knowledge-based and innovative theories, models and practices that can meet these complex challenges

RURALPLAN (project in 2024)

Local cases in 3 countries

- Os municipality, Innlandet, Norway
- Malung-Sälen Municipality, Dalarna, Sweden
- Albula region, Switzerland



A new method for local societal planning

- Framing: the demographic changes/challenges as an overall framework for the whole planning process. Not trivialize, but actively adapt, mitigate, innovate.
- Follow also the other recommendations
- Include general methods for innovation in local societal planning.

RUPIL (rural planning and innovation lab)



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How did it work – what did we learn?

- Demographic changes was a central part of the process (the «framing» worked)
- A broader understanding of «local development»: quality of life, health, labor market, NGOs, housing, etc.
- Innovation? A lot of creativity and suggestions for new solutions

The background of the entire page is a photograph showing a person's hands in a light blue shirt, carefully balancing several light-colored wooden blocks. One block is standing vertically, while others are being placed or are falling, creating a sense of delicate construction or planning.

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POLICY BRIEF

RURALPLAN – Innovative Planning in Shrinking Societies

Key recommendations from RURALPLAN

- Focus on co-creation and shared responsibility. Ask the question “what can we do?” instead of “what others should do.”
- Local politicians should participate as equal participants.
- In order to implement innovative and tailored solutions and strategies, local authorities and actors need room for maneuver.
- For rural municipalities/regions with relatively high capacity and expertise in planning and innovation, RUPIL is self-learning and comes with its own toolbox. Otherwise, support is needed from regional/national governments.

Societal planning in shrinking societies

- ❖ Demographic changes must be accepted and a key part of local planning
- ❖ Unrealistic goals and strategies might lead to waste of resources
- ❖ Innovation is needed in adaption and mitigation to demographic changes
- ❖ Some potential in upscaling/replication between municipalities/regions in Europe, but strategies and solutions mainly dependent on local context (place-based)



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