

Extended abstract

Title

Population Decline: from Subjective Liveability to Objective Liveability

Topic EPC

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Background

Population decline has come to the Netherlands. Although the Dutch population as a whole is still growing, the populations of some regions and especially villages, towns, and neighbourhoods have been decreasing. The prevalence of this demographic development is especially high in the more rural areas which are further removed from the economical centre of the Netherlands. Population decline raises issues on the so-called liveability of these areas.

Population decline and liveability

Population decline is often connected to a decline in the quality of the living environment. The reasoning behind this is that a decrease in the total number of people will lead to a decrease of employment opportunities, the quality of the available housing stock, and the presence of publicly- and privately-owned facilities. In turn, the deterioration of these aspects of the living environment will cause more population decline, while accelerating a further decline in the quality of the living environment: a vicious circle is born.

The idea that population decline in a certain geographical area and a decline of the perceived liveability in the same area always reinforce each other is somewhat out-dated. Thissen (2006) illustrates that this negative development can certainly be true in autonomous villages where the lives of the people evolve mostly in the locality of the village. However, most towns and villages nowadays can be described as having a residential function. People have their homes within the borders of the town, but for work, shopping, physical activity, and social contacts people very often look elsewhere. The increase of (auto)mobility has made this possible.

The fact that people are not dependent on their local living environment anymore does not mean that there is no limit to their range of activities. People are constrained by time and space. Research thus shows that accessibility of all kinds of facilities is indeed of concern to inhabitants of population declining areas (Gardenier, et al., 2011).

Measuring liveability

Defining liveable conditions is a very subjective affair. What is pleasant to one person can be extremely annoying to another. Take for instance a school across the street. This can be a very pleasant aspect for a family with a few young children. The children can go to school by themselves without running much risk of getting into an accident. Furthermore, the parents do not have to bring the children, which saves them time. An elderly woman living next-door however might see the school as a nuisance. Not only does the school bell makes a lot of noise, but the children also scream while playing outside. Moreover, all these parents which pick up their children place their cars in front of the house. So, when she comes home at the wrong time of day, she has to park her car three blocks away. In short, when it comes to the quality of the living environment, one size does not fit all.

Liveability is about the relationship between the individual and his or her living environment. A workable definition of the term liveability comes from Leidelmeijer, et al. (2008): "The degree to which the living environment fits the requirements and desires of the individual". In this definition the individual is the one that judges the living environment. We label this subjective liveability. On the other side of the spectrum are the aspects of the living environment that make the living environment as it is. These aspects can be counted and mapped. We therefore call this objective liveability.

From subjective to objective liveability

One of the instruments that has been developed to measure liveability objectively is the 'Leefbaarometer' (Leidelmeijer, et al. 2008). This instrument uses objective physical, social, and security measures to determine whether a small-scale area faces difficulties with the subjective liveability of its inhabitants. It is used to analyse liveability within the whole of the Netherlands, by comparing objective indicators for a small-scale area to the Dutch average of these objective indicators.

By using the Dutch average as a standard in the 'Leefbaarometer', evaluations of liveability in rural areas are skewed. For instance, a high prevalence of foreign-born people has a large negative effect on the total index. However, not many foreign-born people actually live in rural areas, and therefore the total liveability score for rural areas is predominantly positive as compared to urban areas. However, in this way differences between the liveability in rural areas is lost, a problem of relativity. It is therefore desirable to develop an index which makes a distinction between urban and rural areas.

Another important reason to treat rural areas differently than urban areas is the way in which the living environment is defined. For many of the indicators the living environment is exactly the village, town, or neighbourhood in which one lives. However, as Thissen (2006) tells us, for people in rural areas the living environment stretches far beyond these administrative borders. Thus, instead of

using the administrative borders for determining the living environment, a measure which takes distance and time into account for different indicators should be considered.

Despite the fact that the 'Leefbaarometer' is an insufficient tool to measure issues with liveability in rural areas very useful insights can be extracted from the instrument. One of the understandings of the 'Leefbaarometer' is that the population composition of the community plays an important role in subjective liveability. By combining subjective indicators of liveability with objective ones it was for instance found that in an area with a higher proportion of young families with children, the experienced quality of the living environment is higher as compared to places with lower proportions of young families with children.

This research

In this research a survey will be analysed which holds objective as well as subjective indicators of liveability to develop an objective index of liveability suitable to rural and urban areas. It is believed that, next to environmental characteristics, individual characteristics are an important determinant of the evaluation of the living environment. Therefore special attention will also be paid to the distinction between 'newcomers' and 'stayers' in a certain area. In a follow-up study, the tailored objective indicators of liveability will be connected to local population dynamics by means of a spatial database to see whether population decline affects the quality of the living environment.

Bibliography

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