Bridging the gap
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Population growth in some regions along with shrinkage in others is creating an increase in regional inequality. Combined with economic, spatial and political disparities, the result is a growing gap between the city and the countryside. The innovative idea of a ‘responsible capital city’, an approach which is unique in Europe, can help to bridge this gap.

A decline of their populations was the direct reason for Amsterdam to engage in a special relationship with the towns of Heerlen, Sluis and Delfzijl. In the coming years, total population growth in the Netherlands will level off and in some regions population numbers will decline. This new demographic trend is the result of falling birth rates since the 1970’s, following a period of high birth rates after the Second World War. In 2040, a third of the population will be over 65 in many parts of the country. In so-called shrinkage regions the mortality rate has already overtaken the birth rate. This type of population decline caused by an ageing demographic is called hard shrinkage.

Growth is concentrated in the Randstad region (which comprises the Netherlands’ four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht), particularly in Amsterdam. Many regions are experiencing an exodus of young people to the Randstad and Amsterdam in particular. Sometimes they first move away to study in a regional town or city, such as Groningen for instance, only to move to the Randstad later, after their studies, to find work. This migration away from the regions is called soft shrinkage, and often involves young, highly educated people. Often referred to as selective migration, this brain drain puts further pressure on employment and facilities in shrinkage regions.

Regional differences
Shrinkage in the Netherlands first started in Heerlen, Sluis and Delfzijl. A contributing factor was their location near the Netherlands’ borders, relatively far removed from the economic centre of the country and prone to cross-border migration. Since, shrinkage has also started to affect regions such as the Achterhoek (in the eastern part of the Netherlands) and North Friesland, as well as, closer to Amsterdam, the northernmost part of North-Holland Province. In towns and villages with an ageing population but located close to metropolitan regions and offering attractive living environments, the decline in population due to ageing is often compensated by young families moving in from the cities. This trend is noticeable in areas such as Het Gooi and in small towns like Bergen in North-Holland Province. As well as employment and distance to work, the quality of living environment, culture, identity and charm also determine the ability of councils to retain their young residents and attract newcomers.

Migration
The growing regional divisions caused by population growth and decline are sometimes reinforced by migration from abroad. As a result of low skilled labour migration within the European Union and, to a lesser extent, refugee migration, several shrinking municipalities
Demographic development for each municipality 2006-2011 (a) and 2011-2016 (b). In recent years, regions such as the Achterhoek, North Friesland and North Holland Province have also experienced population decline. See page 2 for the forecast up to 2030.

Source: CBS
have recorded a population rise. At the same time, cities such as Amsterdam and The Hague are seeing an influx of large numbers of highly educated foreign professionals and students. The net effect is that foreign migration can lead to growing inequalities in income between regions.

Political differences

In 2014, both the Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau (SCP, Netherlands Institute for Social Research) and the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR, Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy) reported a growing gap between lower and higher skilled people in the Netherlands. There is less interaction between these groups, they have different lifestyles and they meet less frequently in their own living environments. This gap is widened by selective high skilled migration into the metropolitan regions and even further reinforced by highly skilled people choosing their friends and partners from their own select group.

One of the issues caused by this growing gap between these groups, is a growing distrust of the political process and the ‘governing elite’ among lower and medium skilled workers. In border regions affected by population decline this is sometimes accompanied and reinforced by resentment at the ‘arrogant Randstad’. At the 2017 general elections the Socialist Party (SP) and Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Party for Freedom) emerged as the largest parties in border municipalities in the east of Groningen Province and South Limburg respectively. Both these parties attract a relatively large share of voters who have little trust in politics and the ‘governing elite’. Within Amsterdam itself, a similar pattern can be seen, as the influx of higher educated people has reinforced cultural and political divisions within the city. While PvdA (Labour) suffered a significant loss of their share, D66 (Liberal Democratic Party) and Groen Links (Green Left party) made large gains in the Centre, Zuid, West and East districts, whereas in the less gentrified and poorer North district the SP and PVV picked up a large share of the vote. Two new parties performed particularly well in the North and New West districts (DENK) and in the Southeast district (Artikel 1). Judging from these results, political preferences are shifting and...
differences between different groups of the population are polarising, especially between lower and higher skilled residents.

**Europe**

The link between polarised political opinion and a growing divide between cities and the countryside is not confined to the Netherlands – it has also emerged in the rest of Europe. The most prominent recent example is the British referendum on the United Kingdom leaving the EU, with Brexiteers hailing mostly from rural areas, former industrial towns and cities with high unemployment and also poorer parts of London. Ironically, in the end the vote in Wales, a predominantly rural area which has received relatively large amounts of EU subsidies, swung the referendum towards a Brexit victory.

One of the EU’s main goals is to promote territorial cohesion and decrease social economic differences between regions. This is why poorer regions, mainly in eastern and southern Europe, receive subsidies from so-called cohesion funds. The difficulty with granting these subsidies however, is that there are large disparities between different areas within these regions, especially between urban and rural areas. This is why the European commission has set up a special programme to promote partnerships between cities and the countryside, so-called *urban-rural cooperation* initiatives. If metropolitan areas want to have more say in Europe, they will need to address this issue and take part in these cooperations themselves.

**Sectoral policy**

Another issue widening the urban-rural divide is Europe’s ‘sectoral policy’. Half of the EU’s budget is still spent on farming subsidies. This can lead to depopulation and upscaling of farming activities in the same regions, turning them into large scale production areas and adversely affecting their historical identity and character. In addition, the European climate change goals could transform large swathes of land into energy production areas, making them less attractive to live and possibly leading to a further decrease in population.

This sectoral policy also risks widening the urban-rural divide in the Netherlands. Investments in metropolitan infrastructure and growth regions could confirm rural and shrinking regions in their belief that they are being left behind. This would go contrary to the important challenge of preserving the quality of life, identity and unique character of these areas, of promoting people’s pride in their home regions without letting them feel abandoned by the social and political elite in the west of the country. A prime example of this latter sentiment can be felt in parts of Northeast Groningen, where people have been suffering emotional and material damage from a series of earthquakes caused by decades of local gas drilling operations. Sectoral investments to
‘Depopulation and upscaling of farming activities is turning European regions into large scale production areas.’
attract higher educated people and companies to the region in order to counter population decline and loss of jobs have on the whole proved to be unsuccessful. This was evidenced, for instance, by the lack of interest from buyers for the Blauwestad project, a new luxury village development in the northeast of Groningen.

**European urban-rural partnerships**

Within the European context, Amsterdam is actively involved in urban-rural partnerships, and chairs the METREX European metropolitan network expert group, which has adopted the ‘responsible capital city’ approach in its European URMA project. Currently, Amsterdam is a partner in the follow-up to this project, RUMORE, which is geared towards economic innovation through fostering of urban-rural partnerships and impacting on European structural funds. In 2013 the ‘responsible capital city’ approach was also included in the OECD’s *Rural-Urban Partnerships* report, commissioned by the European Commission. The ESPON research agency, which studies regional development within Europe, has also pleaded for partnerships between large and small municipalities and between growing and shrinking regions. Amsterdam’s initiative to link up with Heerlen, Sluis and Delfzijl perfectly fits in with this ambition.

**Environment and Planning Visions**

The Dutch Environment and Planning Visions play a major role in the development of spatial policy. With the introduction of the Environment and Planning Act in 2019, central government, provinces and municipalities will need to develop comprehensive Environment and Planning Visions which will replace the old Structural Planning Visions. The Environment and Planning Visions can provide solutions to larger issues such as meeting climate targets or bridging growing demographic divides. To be able to do this, the Visions must be allowed to transcend sectoral approaches, as they have been originally intended. This is an important point, because it’s part of the Environment and Planning Vision to promote participation and devolve responsibilities to lower levels as much as possible and practicable. In this scenario, it’s essential to have an overall guiding vision to avoid negative spatial effects on a larger scale and between different sectors. This calls for a social spatial vision which takes into account the growing divisions we can see emerging. It’s also the approach the OECD advised to take on a national and regional level in its report *Governance of Land Use, the case of Amsterdam* (2017). Commissioned by the City of Amsterdam, the OECD remark in their report that for smaller municipalities implementation of the Environment and Planning Act will make great demands on their knowledge, expertise and capacity, especially after earlier decentralisation reforms. Larger towns and cities could support smaller municipalities to deal with these challenges. This so-called capacity building on a mutual basis was one of the main principles on which the partnership between Amsterdam, Heerlen, Sluis and Delfzijl was built.

**Setting an example**

Where do we go from here? Is the onus now on other major Dutch cities to replicate Amsterdam’s initiative? Or is there more needed? In a critical article in 2014, Marco Bontje, a lecturer at the University of Amsterdam argued that the responsibility felt by Amsterdam should really lie with the central Dutch government in The Hague. This goes to show that the ‘responsible city’ approach is not only of interest to other major cities to adopt, but can also serve as an example on regional, national and European levels to bridge the gap.
A night away from Amsterdam

A night away from Amsterdam. Below the window of my hotel I see some youngish waiters smoking.

The cook – big gut, big quiff – has pleased a palate or two and dreams out loud of better jobs to come. When asked about Sluis, his answer’s gruff: “One word, four letters.”

The waiters too will leave here soon enough.

I hear how Zeeland sighs: people, please, come back. But it’s a place the sea itself has fled. – What’s left:

the book Van Dale drudged at here close by, for every poet still a shining light.

I think and think but I don’t know. Maybe the cook will ride off to his girl and drink a blissful pint.

And later five waiters will all be homeward bound, five waiters going down five streets to their five houses, and waiting in each house there is a wondrous bed, enormous, with a canopy of galaxies, a dozen, overhead.

Menno Wigman / translation: David Colmer