

Journal of Rural and Community Development

The Role of Responses to Experiences of Rural Population Decline in the Social Capital of Families

Authors: Hans Elshof & Ajay Bailey

Citation:

Elshof, H., & Bailey, A. (2015). The role of responses to experiences of rural population decline in the social capital of families. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 10(1), 72-93.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey



**BRANDON
UNIVERSITY**

Founded 1899



Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.

The role of responses to experiences of rural population decline in the social capital of families

Hans Elshof

University of Groningen, Netherlands
Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute
h.elshof@rug.nl

Ajay Bailey

University of Groningen, Netherlands
a.bailey@rug.nl

Abstract

Population decline in rural areas has an impact on rural villages. This research investigates to what extent families with children in rural villages experience consequences of population decline, in which ways they respond to these experiences, and how that plays a role in their individual social capital and the communal social capital of their village of residence. To answer these questions, 23 in-depth interviews with families with children were conducted in seven villages in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands. The results show that experienced consequences of population decline largely pertain to tangible aspects of the living environment, such as the decline of services. When meeting places are lost, individual and communal social capital may certainly be harmed. Nevertheless, experienced consequences of population decline can also trigger protective or entrepreneurial communal responses that are beneficial to social capital. For this latter type of response the presence of people who take the lead are more important than any other outside influence. A considerable concern of these community leaders is the decrease in investments of local governments and other institutions, because that is believed to put increasing pressure on already existent self-reliance.

Keywords: population decline, experiences, social capital, North-Netherlands, qualitative research

1.0 Introduction

Regional population decline has become a major issue in rural areas of developed countries. The main causes for this are low fertility levels and continuing urbanization (Matanle & Rausch, 2011). Population decline has an impact on many different aspects of society. On the local level it has been acknowledged to have an impact on the housing market (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2005), service provision (Stockdale, 2002), and employment opportunities (Martinez-Fernandez, Kubo, Noya, & Weyman 2012). These impacts can be summarized as a general decline of the local living environment. Furthermore, population decline negatively affects the financial position of local governments, which reduces their efficacy to counter

the consequences of population decline. Therefore, local governments in rural areas facing population decline increasingly call upon the collective self-reliance of people living in declining rural villages to shape and maintain their own living environment.

In order for collective self-reliance in villages to be effective, social capital within a village needs to be already present or needs to develop further (Besser, 2009; Wilding, 2011; Woolcock, 1998). In effect, inhabitants of rural villages need to be able to work together to achieve goals which are beyond the reach of their individual efforts. However, it is likely that consequences of population decline impede on preconditions for social capital. Such a relation would comprise three stages: experienced impacts of population decline, people's response to these impacts, and the consequence of these responses for social capital. For example, economizing governments could lower subsidies for public services, which may result in the loss of meeting places in rural villages. People who used to visit these places might respond by staying at home, thus lowering the social capital of these villages and its inhabitants. Unquestionably, cutbacks and the closure of meeting places also occur in rural villages that do not face population decline. However, population decline can accelerate these general changes (Van Dam, De Groot, & Verwest, 2006), which makes the need for effective forms of social capital, such as citizen engagement and activities, more prominent in declining areas.

The three stages that are involved in the impact of population decline on the social capital of rural villages demand further research. First, little empirical research has been conducted on the ways in which people in rural villages experience population decline. To the best of our knowledge only a Scottish (Stockdale, 2004) and a Japanese study (Matanle & Sato, 2010) have approached the consequences of population decline in this way. They both sketch images of decay and people's experiences of declines in the numbers of people, services, and employment opportunities. However, more studies are needed which describe the experiences of population decline in different cultural and socio-economic settings. Second, there is a large body of literature that investigates how people respond to change in their living environment in urban (e.g. Van der Land & Doff, 2010 & Williams & Windbank, 2000) and rural areas (e.g. Barnett & Barnett, 2003; Hammond, Norton, Schmidt, & Sokolow, 2010; Woods, 2005). So far however, none have focused on how the responses to change in the living environment are driven by population decline, changes social capital. Third, existing research generally focusses either on the creation of social capital in communities (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000), or social capital as an input for community outcomes such as economic development (Flora, 1998) or well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). However, research which considers social capital as a source and an outcome simultaneously is limited, while such a dynamic view of social capital could contribute to knowledge on the extent to which individuals contribute to or make use of the social capital within their village and its timing.

The aim of this research is thus to gain insight into the ways in which experiences of population decline play a role in the social capital of people living in rural villages. It provides an empirical example of how an important demographic development is linked to the lives of individuals and the organization of their communities. The study takes place in rural villages in the region *Ommeland* in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands, which has faced population decline in rural villages for several decades and provides a typical case of a declining rural hinterland that envelops a growing regional center. We adopt a qualitative approach

in which 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with families with young children in seven rural villages. We chose people in a single life phase because people in a single life phase are likely to experience population decline in similar ways. Families with young children were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, relatively fewer families with children are associated with lower future population growth (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). Looking into their experiences of decline and the development of their social capital could thus be useful for future rural planning strategies. Secondly, families with young children may be affected by population decline specifically because of primary school closures that are associated with the decline. However, to get a variety of experiences, we have chosen people in this life phase of different age, sex, and duration of residence.

2.0 Population Decline, Responsive Behavior, and Social Capital

Rural population decline is by no means a new phenomenon in developed countries. In Europe, large migration flows from rural to urban areas commenced in the late 19th century and continued in many countries up to the 1960s, after which people started to move back to the countryside (Woods, 2005). However, many rural areas in developed countries today are facing population decline once more because of continuing flows of young adults who pursue educational and employment opportunities in the cities. The facts that these young adults do not always return and that the fertility levels of those still present are often below replacement levels seem to suggest that in many rural regions population decline is likely to continue during the coming decades. Nevertheless, for many people rural areas will remain attractive places to live. They are allured by what is commonly referred to as the rural idyll: the countryside as a green and pleasant land where a less-hurried lifestyle can be a refuge from modernity (Halfacree, 1995). However, under the influence of population decline, their villages are changing.

It is difficult to determine to what extent population decline is responsible for particular changes in rural villages because population decline is always accompanied by other societal changes. In some cases the consequences of population decline appear to be rather straightforward. For example, primary schools in villages may close, because their continued existence is mostly dependent on the number of pupils within close proximity (Forsythe, 1984). Furthermore, a strong decline of the population may result in household decline, possibly causing vacant housing and lower housing prices (Glaeser et al., 2005). Additionally, population decline decreases the tax base for local governments (Coleman & Rowthorn, 2011). This might force these institutions to cut back on their expenditures by closing local public services (Fagence, 1980). In other cases population decline only accelerates change that would have occurred regardless of the decline (Van Dam et al., 2006). For example, the loss of retail businesses in villages is largely caused by the inability of local shops to compete with larger stores that rural inhabitants can easily reach by car. The question is now whether these consequences are indeed experienced by rural inhabitants as being problematic.

Research on the way in which people in rural areas experience population decline is limited. Matanle and Sato (2010) found that inhabitants of Niigata prefecture experienced a decline in the number of young people and small businesses. However, they also found that many residents now accepted continued shrinkage and were more concerned with “how to live well within a shrinking region” (p.208). Stockdale (2004) found that people in declining rural areas in Scotland experienced

dejuvenation as well as ageing. Furthermore, the participants in her study identified a decline in rural services and were concerned about the prospects for the rural economy. Additionally, she discovered that people were less willing to engage in local activities. Other research does not focus directly on population decline, but on changes associated with it. The impact of primary school closure is debated, for example. Some claim that primary school closure disconnects communities from their past and that villages lose a crucial meeting point (Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, & Witten, 2009). Others stress that school closure is not as devastating as often perceived, and should be seen as an indicator of community decline, not as a cause (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). Both are probably right depending on the context, but it is clear that primary school closures often generate debate and action in local rural communities (Woods, 2005). How people experience these changes can furthermore be expected to be dependent on the duration of residence. People, who have resided in the neighbourhood for a longer time, are more emotionally attached to the neighbourhood (Cuba & Hummon, 1993) and more likely to experience signs of decline of their village (Lewicka, 2005).

When population decline results in changes in the local living environment, people's regular activity patterns can be disturbed, which can trigger a certain response. Numerous studies deal with the ways in which people respond to change in their living environment, which is also referred to as 'coping behavior'. Van der Land and Doff (2010) studied the ways in which people respond to perceived neighborhood decline in two cities in the Netherlands. By combining Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice and Loyalty theory, which discusses two possible responses (exit or voice) of people to deteriorating quality of goods, and Bandura's (1997) Efficacy theory, which stresses the importance of one's self-efficacy in responses to change, they were able to identify three ways of coping: (partly) withdraw, accept and adapt, and show voice. People who (partly) withdraw, stop participating in activities in the neighborhood by going to other places or abandoning the activities completely. People who accept and adapt take the perceived decline for granted, change their behavior, but do not retreat from the neighborhood. People who show voice do not accept the decline and instead try to exercise social control or organize events that might turn around the decline of the neighborhood.

2.1 Social Capital

The concept of social capital can be understood from an individual and a communal perspective. The individual perspective on social capital, which originates in work by Coleman (1988), regards social capital as the collection of a person's social contacts that affect their economic, physical, and emotional well-being. A person may thus receive practical or emotional help from people within their social network (Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008). The communal perspective, rooted in research by Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000), perceives social capital as a collective effort to produce benefits that exceed the capabilities of an individual. These two perspectives can be seen as two sides of the same coin. On the one side, individuals make efforts to create and maintain their personal social capital. On the other side, they often draw these personal contacts from existing social communities. Thus, communities are a collection of individual social ties. For these individual social ties to come together in a community, the people involved need to have something in common. Living in the same village is such a commonality that brings together individual and communal social capital.

The effects of communal social capital have been widely studied. An important finding is that villages with higher levels of communal social capital are better capable of dealing with change (Adger, 2000; Wilding, 2011). Such capacities, which are often referred to as resilience (Steiner & Markantoni, 2014), can empower communities and make them able to influence local life (Fournier, 2012). Research on the causes of communal social capital is less extensive. Nevertheless, it has been found that communal social capital may be an effect of the presence of voluntary associations (Edwards & Foley, 2001), homogeneity of the population (Letki, 2008), effective leadership (Purdue, 2001), and local services and amenities, of which the primary school was defined as especially central to the lives of families with young children (Witten, McCreanor, & Kearns, 2003).

The causes and effects of communal social capital can be subject to circulatory reasoning (Portes, 1998). For instance, villages with high levels of communal social capital will usually be able to retain or overcome the closure of services under pressure of population decline, keeping the level of services at a higher level, which might reinforce the existing communal social capital. Conversely, villages with low levels of communal social capital might lose all their services, which further erodes the existing communal social capital. However, such a line of reasoning ignores the fact that communal social capital in a village is constantly subject to influences, which are not directly related to the communal social capital as such. Communal social capital can for instance increase if a community leader moves into a village. Or, a village might deteriorate to such an extent that people will start to show voice and come together, instead of withdraw. Especially such changes in communal social capital, which are driven by individual efforts are of interest in this study.

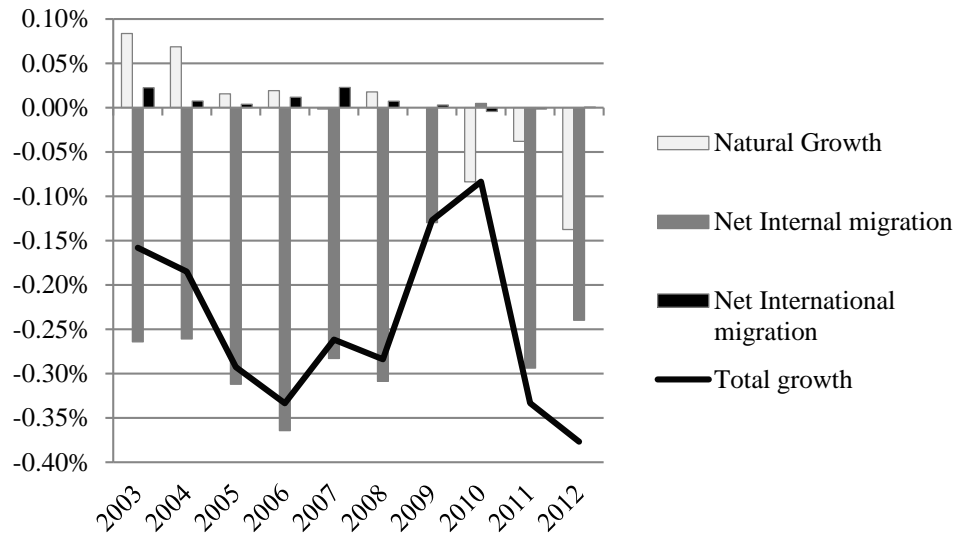
3.0 Study Setting, Data, and Methods

The province of Groningen is located in the Northeast of the Netherlands. Its capital is the city of Groningen, which is inhabited by close to 200,000 people, many of them students. The hinterland of the city is called *Ommeland* (Eng: “surrounding land”), which is characterized in the North by compact settlements surrounded by reclaimed farming land, and in the East by ribbon villages and towns that developed in part around the peat industry in the 19th century. The population of the province increased from 570,480 inhabitants in 2004 to 580,875 in 2014. However, this growth can predominantly be attributed to the city of Groningen. In fact, the population of *Ommeland* decreased by around 9,000 during this period. *Ommeland* is a typical rural area in the sense that the mechanization of agriculture has lowered traditional employment opportunities since the 1950s, while at the same time increased car use has diminished the importance of the village for means of existence. Like many other rural areas, *Ommeland* has therefore witnessed a large outflow of young adults seeking education and employment opportunities outside the region. Often their first move is towards Groningen city, followed by a move to the West of the Netherlands, the economic core area of the country (Latten, Das, & Chkalova, 2008).

Following the classification of Bucher and Mai (2005), *Ommeland* has become a new type of depopulation area where net outmigration and negative natural growth occur simultaneously. Figure 1 shows that negative net migration occurred in almost every year of the last decade, but that negative natural growth is a more recent trend. The main cause for this latter trend can be found in decreasing numbers of births and not yet in increasing mortality (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). However, projections

show that mortality will increase in the future due to the ageing of the baby-boom generation born in the 1950s and 1960s, causing negative natural growth to become an even more important factor in population decline.

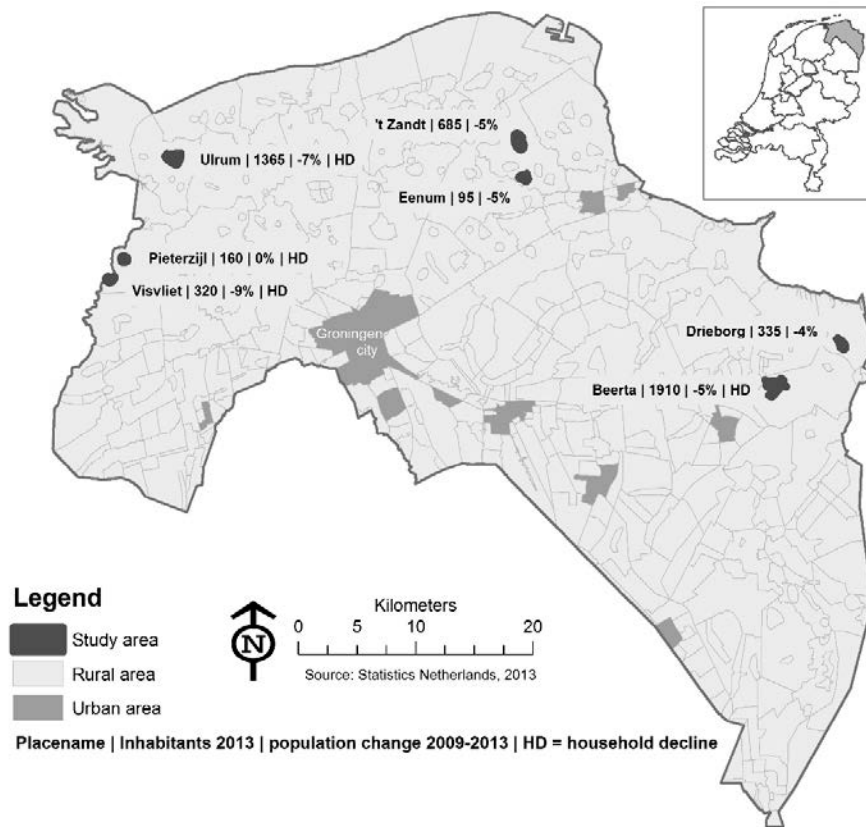
Figure 1. Population change Ommeland region 2003-2012



3.1 Study Area

Seven villages were selected as study areas to include a range of experiences of population decline. Villages of different sizes were selected to represent villages with different (expected) levels of services. This could alter the way in which population decline was experienced, because villages with former higher levels of services had more to lose than villages that had low levels of services for decades already. Selecting villages in different regions aimed to capture the regional diversity of *Ommeland*, as the regions all have a somewhat different history, culture, and distance to the city of Groningen, which could possibly mediate the effects of decline. Moreover, it was taken into account in the village selection whether a primary school was present, absent, or nominated for closure in the near future, because the primary school was expected to be an important service for families with children and an important sign of decline. The villages that were picked in the study area were known as villages where signs of decline were prominent because of the intended closure of a primary school ('t Zandt, Visvliet) or a large decrease of services over the last decade (Ulrum, Beerta). Other villages were picked because they were located close to one of these villages and were known to have relatively high levels of communal social capital. Because the results from the interviews in the last three villages corresponded largely with the results from the first four villages it was decided not to include more than seven villages in the study area. To gain more knowledge about the villages, informal talks were held with older villagers. Furthermore, the researcher lived in three villages in *Ommeland* for several weeks each. This gave more insight into what it was like to live in Dutch rural areas and made it easier to meet potential participants. Figure 2 shows the selected villages in the province of Groningen and several of their characteristics.

Figure 2. Study Area



3.2 Participant Recruitment

A total of 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with one of the adult members of families with at least one child of primary school age living at home, during the period September to December 2012. Of these, 21 were held at people's homes and two in the village's community center. Participants were initially recruited by sending a letter to local interest groups, followed by a phone call. As a consequence, the first participants in the villages were all members of local interest groups. These people differed in terms of sex, age, education and marital status. Moreover, there was an adequate balance of newcomers, regional movers, and long-term residents. Because these participants were members of the local interest group, they were all active members of the village society, which positively influenced their individual social capital and their opinions about the communal social capital. The remaining participants were therefore recruited by snowballing through the initial participants, with a focus on recruiting those people who were less active members of the village community. Participant recruitment ended when the researcher felt that the point of data saturation was achieved. Table 1 contains a list of all participants including a fictitious name, sex, age, village, type of resident, and duration of residence. The type of resident is based on the duration of residence in the village and whether people were born and raised in rural areas of the province of Groningen. Newcomers were either living in the village for a short time or were not originally from the region. Regional movers had lived in the village for at least a decade and were originally from rural Groningen. Long-term residents were either born and raised in the village or had lived there for at least 20 years.

Table 1. *Study Participants*

Name	Sex	Age Group	Village	Type of resident	Duration of residence
Amanda	F	20-24	't Zandt	Newcomer	5-9 years
Berend	M	35-39	't Zandt	Newcomer	10-14 years
Chantal	F	35-39	't Zandt	Long-term	BR*
Femke	F	35-39	't Zandt	Long-term	25-29 years*
Grietje	F	35-39	't Zandt	Newcomer	0-4 years
Mirjam	F	30-34	't Zandt	Long-term	BR*
Rianne	F	35-39	't Zandt	Regional	15-19 years
Hendrik	M	35-39	Beerta	Long-term	BR
Joost	M	40-44	Beerta	Regional	10-14 years
Klaas	M	35-39	Beerta	Long-term	BR
Ivo	M	40-44	Drieborg	Long-term	BR*
Lars	M	35-39	Drieborg	Long-term	BR
Dyneke	F	40-44	Eenum/Pieterzijl	Newcomer	5-9 years
Eric	M	50-54	Eenum/Pieterzijl	Newcomer	0-4 years
Olga	F	30-34	Eenum/Pieterzijl	Long-term	BR*
Tim	M	35-39	Eenum/Pieterzijl	Newcomer	10-15 years
Nico	M	30-34	Ulrum	Long-term	BR
Willemien	F	40-44	Ulrum	Regional	15-20 years
Ymke	F	25-29	Ulrum	Newcomer	5-9 years
Zwaantje	F	25-29	Ulrum	Regional	10-15 years
Peter	M	45-49	Visvliet	Newcomer	15-19 years
Stefan	M	40-44	Visvliet	Long-term	BR
Vanessa	F	40-44	Visvliet	Newcomer	20-24

BR = Born and raised *=Lived elsewhere for some time

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The in-depth interviews were conducted using the conventions for qualitative research as laid out by Hennink, Hutter, and Baily (2011). Before the start of the interviews the participants signed an agreement of informed consent. This document briefly explained the topic of the interview, the fact that it was audio-recorded, confidential and anonymous, and could be aborted at any time. A semi-structured interview guide containing several questions and probes ensured that all important topics were covered in all interviews. In the interviews people were

first questioned about their personal lives for the purpose of developing rapport. Questions were then asked about the participant's migration history and their feelings about their village of residence. At this point, the topic of population decline had generally already come up in the conversation. The next step in the interview was to discuss the individual social capital of the participant and how this intertwined with communal social capital of the village. This was done by asking people about with whom they had met, how often, and under which circumstances. In case the social contacts were found in the village further inquiries were made on the value of these contacts and how they contributed to the communal social capital of the village. When new information came up in one interview it could serve as input in the next. The interviews were transcribed and then coded using NVivo software. Firstly, inductive and deductive codes were generated out of four specifically selected interviews, including all types of residents and levels of village involvement. Then the rest of the data was labelled using these codes. The main coding categories that emerged from the data include: experiences of loss, coping behavior, and changes in social capital.

4.0 Experiences of Population Decline

The experiences of population decline in the village can be summarized as experiences of loss, but this does not imply that population decline causes an accumulation of negative experiences. Surely, among the majority of the participants, changes in the village associated with population decline stir feelings of regret. However, at the same time, many participants see these changes as an inevitable aspect of living in a rural village and the difficulties arising from the changes as surmountable. The experiences of loss can be divided in three main categories: 1) loss of services 2) loss of population and 3) loss of quality of the living environment. Furthermore, people experienced a loss of local investments by government and other institutions, which the participants believed to be a cause as well as a result of the other three issues.

4.1 Loss of Services

The extent to which a decline of services was experienced varied with the size of the village. The larger the village, the more a loss of services was reported as an experience of population decline. This can be explained from the point of departure in the smaller villages where most services had already been gone for decades. There was clearly not much more to lose. The larger villages had held a relatively high level of services until recently, and were now also beginning to lose an increasing number of services. Table 2 provides an overview of the key services that were reported to be present, threatened in their existence, or closed in the last decade. The smallest two villages did not experience any closure of services, while most services were lost in the second and third largest villages. Service decline in the largest village does not seem to be very drastic, but this is partly explained by the number of services that the village shares with a neighboring village of similar size.

Table 2. Reported presence, closure or threatened existence of services in villages (inhabitants 2013)

	Beerta (1910)	Ulrum (1365)	't Zandt (685)	Drieborg (335)	Visvliet (320)	Pieterzijl (160)	Eenum (95)
Community center	C		P	P	P	P	P
Primary school	P	T/2	T	P	T	T*	T*
Grocery store	P	T	C		C		
General Practitioner	P*	C	P				
Library	P*	C	C		P**		
Pub	C/3	P	C	C	P		
Cash Machine	P	C	C				
Football club	P*	P*	T	P			
Sports hall	C	P	P	P	P		

P=Present (*shared with neighboring village **only occasionally opened)

C=closed during the last 10 years | T=threatened in existence

/#=number of services (1 if not mentioned)

Feelings of the participants that their village was a lively place were more related to the change in the availability of services than to the actual level of services. Expectations about this level were higher in larger villages than in smaller villages. Whether participants experienced the closure of a service as a loss depended in part on their personal preferences. The pub was, for instance, missed by those who used to visit this place. Especially long-term residents were sensitive to service decline, because they related the current situation to what once was. This aroused feelings of regret, but also of irritation because the stayers also compared the situation in their own village to the situation in nearby villages with higher levels of services. Although often aware of the former level of services in the village, newcomers did not personally experience those times, and therefore they were less inclined to be emotionally attached to the services in the village. Consider the following statements by participants who moved to 't Zandt fifteen and two years ago respectively:

There is not much to do anymore, before there was. There was a gymnastics club, a football club. [...] There was a pub which hosted a darts team and a pool team. The shooting club was also there. That was really the key place in the village. There was a lot to do in the village, in the beginning...

Rianne, female, 35-39 years, regional mover

We came here for the place, the house and the garden. That is what we aimed for. [...] Facilities weren't really important. We knew that there was less here...

Grietje, female, 35-39 years, newcomer

The feelings of the participants following service decline differed between the type of service. The closure of privately-owned services was met with feelings of regret, but also of inevitability and acquiescence. Local grocery stores for instance were only visited for the so-called "forgotten groceries", while the bulk of groceries was bought at larger supermarkets 10 to 20 kilometers away which boast more products

at lower prices. People were well aware that their behavior had undermined the continued existence of the supermarket and there was nobody who could be blamed for its closure. However, in the case of public services the government could be blamed for the closure. Moreover, it gave rise to feelings of regional inequality, because larger villages or towns within the municipality were considered to be favored over one's own village.

Okay, they (the local government) have to economize, but, if I see the large investments in the next village and the regional center... Sure, these are bigger places, but they get all the investments and I think that villages like ours are also entitled to some help.

Ivo, male 35-39 years, long-term resident

Some participants also related service decline to expectations of the 'end of the village'. This prospect actually needs the addition 'as it used to be', because none of the participants expressed the belief that their village would be completely deserted in the future. Nonetheless, some participants expected that the village would evolve in a negative way if more services would close.

If you close the school and the supermarket it will turn bad here. [...] I think that you will ruin the village then.

Hendrik, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

The type of service that was expected to give the biggest blow to the village depended on which services were still left in the village. When the supermarket was still there, as in Beerta for example, it was believed to be the most vital service for the survival of the village, but when only a community center was left, as in the smaller villages Pieterzijl and Eenum, this was the most important service to retain. As the participants were adult members of families with children, the primary school was often pinpointed as the most important service in the village. This was not only out of self-interest, but also because the primary school was seen as an important meeting place.

4.2 Loss of People

A second experienced consequence of population decline was the actual loss of population. Mainly the decline in the number of children, young and older adults was of concern. The loss of children and young adults is a well-known cause of population decline, but it was not experienced in all of the villages alike. In some villages the decline in the number of young people was made very tangible by the threatened existence of the primary school. In contrast, a participant in Pieterzijl noticed an increase in the number of children in their village despite the absence of a primary school within the village.

Yes, there are fewer children. Before there were two schools and now there is only one. So the children of the second school are all gone, so, there are fewer children.

Chantal, female, 35-39 years, long-term resident

There was a period that there were fewer children. But I keep track of the number of births, because I'm part of the children's activities committee, and there are quite a few children here now.

Olga, female, 30-34 years, long-term resident

In some of the villages participants experienced a decline in the number of older adults. This is an interesting finding because in declining regions young people have been found to leave while older people stay (Haartsen et al., 2010; Reher, 2007; Stockdale, 2004). Apparently, on the local level, people also experience a decline in the number of older people. That this can indeed be the case in declining villages is exemplified by research by Elshof et al. (2014) who found that older people are more likely to leave declining than non-declining villages.

There are not many older people anymore. [...] People talk about ageing, but it is actually de-ageing here.

Lars, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

4.3 Loss of Quality of the Living Environment

A third experience of population decline was found in the loss of quality of the living environment. Vacant housing and buildings that formerly housed services were seen as a nuisance, because the properties were no longer maintained.

It [the house formerly occupied by the chaplain] was empty for years. [...] not a pretty sight, especially not in the center of the village.

Chantal, female, 35-39 years, long-term resident

Furthermore, a number of participants noticed that the maintenance of publicly owned local infrastructure was at a low level. Roadsides were now mowed only once or twice a year, instead of once every month before. Furthermore, sidewalks were found to contain holes and especially the many crooked tiles in the sidewalks were seen as unpleasant.

This weekend I went for a walk. Almost broke my neck three times because of a flagstone path which was all higgledy-piggledy.

Klaas, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

Facing similar difficulties of minimal maintenance, the village of Drieborg had hired a village handyman who was formerly on benefits. The funding was provided by the local government that only had to allocate half of their regular funds, because the villagers themselves were now responsible for providing the equipment. Under pressure of further cutbacks, however, the funding of the village handyman was cancelled.

So, what you get is that they cut back on something that is already very cheap. This guy still costs the government the same amount of money, but paid with different funding. He's at home without a job, and we don't have village handyman anymore. It's a farce, a scandal.

Ivo, male, 40-44 years, long-term resident

4.4 Reflections of Experiences of Decline

Despite the experienced losses the participants were generally very happy to live in a rural village. They stressed the importance of being able to buy their dream house for a reasonable price, their closeness to nature, and the peace, quiet and safety (also for their children) in the village. This corresponds broadly to the idea of the rural idyll, which has previously been found in the Netherlands (Van Dam, Heins, & Elbersen, 2002).

My dream was always to have a white, detached house with a piece of land.
A large piece of land.

Berend, male, 35-39 years, newcomer

From here you have good walking paths. [...] It's perfect. Especially when you have dogs. The kids are always playing in the forest. Perfect!

Rianne, female, 35-39 years, regional mover

Furthermore, it turned out that other aspects of the participants' lives were more important to their well-being. Most of them certainly contemplated experiences of decline, but considered it a mere triviality as compared to being healthy, having a job, and having their loved ones around. Moreover, some participants experienced population decline as a slowly evolving process.

It's just like gaining weight. You don't notice, until someone you haven't seen for a while drops by and says: "Hey, you've put on some pounds!"

Chantal, female, 35-39 years, long-term resident

This low pace allowed time for people to cope with the changing circumstances. However, this was not always a smooth transition. Often there was a certain amount of loss aversion at first, followed by acceptance and adaptation at later stages.

Oh, those grumbling moms... It was terrible for them that they had to bring their child to football practice in the next village. But now, two years down the line, everything is fine. Nobody is talking about it anymore.

Willemien, female, 40-44 years, regional mover

5.0 How Population Decline Plays a Role in Social Capital

The large majority of the participants were satisfied with their individual social capital. They all had people they could rely on for practical as well as emotional support. The geographical distribution of their social network depended to some extent on the participant's duration of residence in the village. In general the social network of newcomers was more scattered than that of long-term residents. Nonetheless, everybody had at least some connection with fellow villagers. A major source of social contacts for the participants were their children. They provided a reason to become acquainted with village life and meet other villagers, especially for newcomers.

Yes, I definitely feel at home. It used to be different because I had no contacts, because I had no reason to be connected to the village, but since the children go to school I feel at home.

Amanda, female, 20-24 years, newcomer

A primary school in the village increased the connection of the participant to the village. Some of the female participants stressed the importance of meeting other parents in the schoolyard when picking up their children. A few even arrived 15 minutes early because they liked the socializing that much. Such a gathering constitutes a form of communal social capital in itself, but it was also indicated to stimulate new activities. This is made clear by this participant who provided a reason for the large number of activities in his village.

That is also because the school is still there, which is a meeting point where many parents meet. So, things are talked over, plans are made, and what not.

Berend, male, 35-39 years, newcomer

There were many ways for people to tap into the communal social capital and enrich their individual social capital. Most of the participants were a member of a club for sports such as football, ice skating, or tennis. Some were actively involved in organizing events for people in the village which ranged from small children's activities to relatively large fairs. All participants visited at least a few village events each year. Furthermore, participants expressed that the village was a safe place for their children to grow up.

We have a handicapped daughter and then it's nice to have some social control. If she walks on the Old Dike, we get a phone call: your daughter is walking here, or, she is now sitting on my couch.

Lars, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

Communal social capital seemed to be more partitioned in larger villages than in smaller villages. The larger the village, the larger the variety of activities. A clear example was found in the (former) existence of neighborhood associations in Ulrum and Beerta, while in other villages only associations were found that served the interests of the entire village. Furthermore, in smaller villages the number of meeting places was smaller. This forced everybody who wanted to partake in activities organized in the village to be in the same place. It can therefore be said that communal social capital was less an issue in the larger villages than in the smaller villages. In this respect, 't Zandt seemed to be at an interesting turning-point. The village used to contain a large variety of clubs and other meeting places, which allowed for a more partitioned community. Because several clubs and meeting places had ceased to exist during the last decade, the feeling was that the village was now coming together.

Yes, at present 't Zandt is an active village, also because of the developments of decline of course. People are increasingly joining forces.

Berend, male, 35-39, newcomer

Another important element of communal social capital were those people who not only took the lead in organizing events and bringing people together, but also made sure that things actually got done. These so-called *trekkers* were found to be newcomers, regional movers, as well as long-term residents. They were often involved in several clubs, associations, or activities. The *trekkers* needed help from other villagers to materialize their ideas, especially now that local governments had lowered subsidies and stressed the importance of self-reliance in villages. However, this often proved to be difficult.

We are increasingly dependent on volunteers, because of government cutbacks. [...] We do everything to mobilize people [...] There is a certain decrease, that it is more difficult to mobilize people. Because they have done a lot already, or they think, let somebody else do it this time...

Ivo, male, 40-44 years, long-term resident

5.1 Responses to Experiences of Population Decline

The participants responded to experiences of loss in their village in individual as well as communal ways. Individual responses comprised those in which people acted without necessarily taking other villagers into account, and were not aimed at maintaining or increasing the quality of the living environment. Three types of individual responses to experiences of loss could be identified: moving elsewhere, discontinuing former behavior, and substituting former behavior. Communal responses of participants involved other villagers and were directed at making a difference in the village. Two types of communal responses could be identified: protective and entrepreneurial behavior. The different types of responsive behavior to experiences of loss influenced individual and communal social capital in varying ways.

Individual responses

Although none of the participants intended to move out, it was suggested that others might. Consider the following statements which show that some believed that older people move voluntarily because they want to be closer to services, while others also saw older people moving involuntarily because there is no suitable housing to be found in the village.

Older people think that they have to leave because there are no services left. [...] if you become less mobile, you would rather be close to the services [...].

Joost, male, 40-44 years, regional mover

Many older people also left because their houses were demolished and not because they wanted to. [...] They were more or less forced.

Lars, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

Another individual response to experienced losses in the village was to discontinue former activities without replacing them. Some people discontinued behavior when a service they used closed and there was often no direct replacement in the village. Using similar services in nearby villages was also not always an option, for instance because of distance. This is exemplified by this participant who sees difficulties for his children because of the closure of the village library.

I don't see my children getting on their bikes on Wednesday afternoon going to the next village because they are so eager to read. [...] Here we could send our children there, as in, have a look in the library, you can read there. It isn't bad for the children, right? [...] That's gone, and it's never coming back.

Nico, male, 30-34 years, long-term resident

Not visiting the library anymore is not likely to have a major influence on individual or communal social capital. However, the loss of services that function as meeting places seemed to be more problematic. In one village for example, the local pub closed down. For those who visited, it was not really possible to find a substitute for this place. Consequently, individual social capital was negatively influenced. The following quote explains how the group of regular customers fell apart because the meeting place disappeared.

Look, these are not people for your daily cup of coffee, but people you see at a party. There where the fun is. These people also go the pub. And then you also go to the pub and see each other over there, chatting and so on. That is actually gone...

Rianne, female, 35-39 years, regional mover

In another village, participants identified that the closure of the community center had negatively influenced communal social capital because several clubs no longer had a place for their activities. Furthermore, because the community center had housed several clubs it used to be much easier to find volunteers for all kinds of activities.

Participant: There is simply no room anymore, no place, no location.

Interviewer: And that is why these clubs disappear?

Participant: Yes, exactly!

Klaas, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

When people came together in the community center and such, then, for example at a party or whatever. And you wanted to organize something, then you would speak to so many people, on such an evening, then you would have a big group together. [...] Look, you lost some things, and, and people stick to themselves then. [...] And to get all those people back together... That's a big problem.

Hendrik, male, 35-39 years, long-term resident

Although some of the lost activities were difficult to replace for the participants and affected both individual and communal social capital, many other lost activities were substituted. People felt regret over the losses, but accepted what had happened and adapted their behavior. For example, a participant who saw the library as an essential service went to the library in the regional center, because she had to go there anyway.

We have to go to the next village, like we have to for most things anyway...

Amanda, female, 20-24, newcomer

In other cases substitution for experienced losses was more related to social capital. It turned out that the participants cared mostly about the social capital of their children when they experienced these losses. Changes in their own social capital were not often related to disappearing services, but mostly to the fact that they were busy parents now, as opposed to young adults with more free time. When a substitution for one of the children's social activities was found, it did not necessarily mean that their children's social capital was negatively influenced. The

son of one of the participants for instance had to join the football club in the next village, after regulations did not allow him to keep on playing for the village team.

Participant: He was the only one who wanted to play football, and according to the Dutch football association, I'm not quite sure, he could not play with a team that was much younger. [...] Then he went to the next village.

Interviewer: Sort of forced?

Participant: Yes, actually yes... [...] But now he has his friends there and a nice team.

Femke, female, 35-39 years, long-term resident

For most participants it was no problem to bring their children to activities outside the village. However, for some it raised the fear that their children would grow up disconnected from the village without an idea of what was home.

I think it is important that my daughter has friends in the village. [...] I know somebody who has a son who goes to school in the regional center. And, his peers actually ignore him, because he is in a different school and has different school times. [...] I think that is a real pity.

Mirjam, female, 30-34 years, long-term resident

I would really like it if my children could go to school here. If they did, then they'd also know the other children who live here. Know the parents. That they know the people in the village. That it is their home. That they put down roots here.

Grietje, female, 35-39, newcomer

Communal responses

In some cases the experiences of loss were not taken for granted. Instead, the participants engaged in communal activities to bring a halt to the experienced losses in their villages. They did so because they were genuinely concerned about the future of the village, but also because they saw possibilities.

You do your best for what is here, and that it will stay here. That would be very nice, and I really think it is possible.

Grietje, female, 35-39, newcomer

Protective behavior occurred when authorities had decided that a service had to close, and villagers believed this to be a bad idea. A forthcoming closure of the primary school was unquestionably the public service for which families with children rallied the most. Not only did the participants who were involved in this protective behavior believe that it was important that their children could be educated nearby, but also the rootedness of the school in the village community was deemed important. Moreover, the primary school was also ascribed a social function. All of these reasons made the protests against the school closures come naturally.

How that went? Two years ago somebody from the school board came to say that there would be a new situation in 2017, and that it was doubtful if the school would continue to exist. Well, everybody was up in arms of

course. A petition was circulated in the village which basically said: school must stay!

Chantal, female, 35-39 years, long-term resident

Entrepreneurial behavior was also found to be a communal effort aimed at securing a living environment of good quality. However, it did not involve activities intended to keep what was left, but rather to create new activities. Activities like this were usually not a response to the closure of a specific service, but to a general feeling that the village deserved better. Consider the following statement of Hendrik who entered a completely new village association after the old one had disassembled. He was asked to organize the *Sinterklaas* party—a national custom where children supposedly get presents from an old bishop who enters villages on a horse or by boat—but he also had the idea to organize a Christmas market:

They said, don't bite off more than you can chew. I said, there will be *Sinterklaas* AND a Christmas market! [...] The first year there were 5,000 visitors, the next one, more than 10,000!¹

Hendrik, male, 35-39, long-term resident

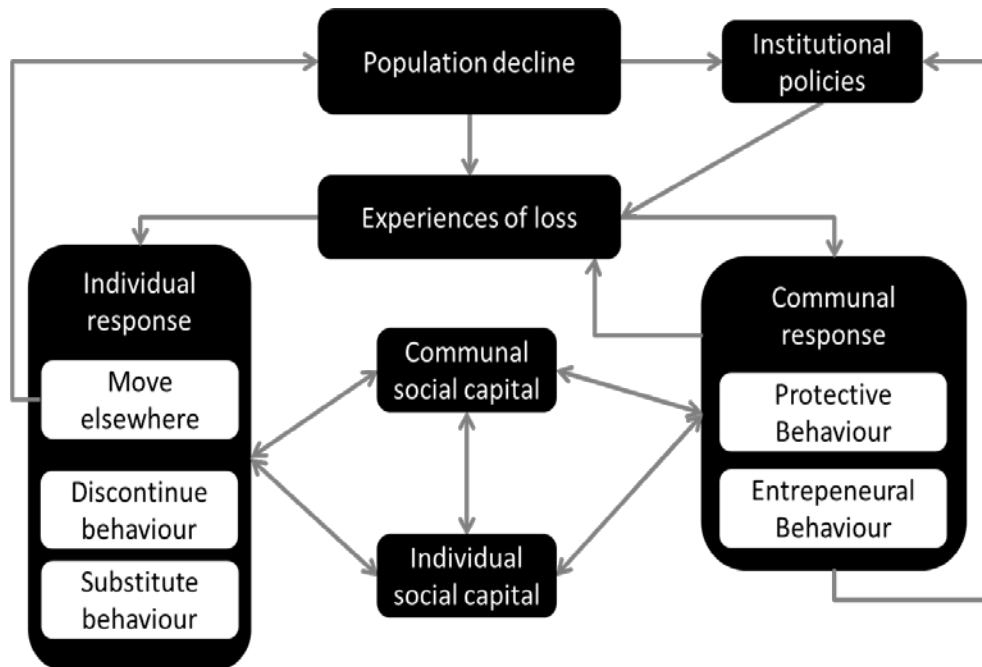
Hendrik's initiative was one of the most successful entrepreneurial activities for the community found in this study. Nevertheless, other entrepreneurial activities were similarly important for communal social capital and they occurred in all studied villages as can be seen from the following examples. In Eenum villagers started a communal garden. In addition to the weekly card game in Pieterzijl, a monthly board game night was organized. The villagers of Visvliet, which is crossed by a stream, were busy renewing their recreational harbor. In Drieborg arty community benches were erected at nice places overlooking the reclaimed lands. People from 't Zandt were now able to have dinner with other villagers every two weeks at reduced rates. And in Ulrum villagers were busy creating a playground which was also accessible for disabled children.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has shown that families with young children in rural villages certainly experience population decline and that these experiences play a role in individual and communal social capital. In the inductive model found in Figure 3 it can be observed how the experienced losses by adult members of families with young children could trigger individual and communal responses. Communal responses had the potential to mitigate the experiences of loss by protecting threatened services or by initiating entrepreneurial activities. They could do so in a direct way or by calling upon institutions to change their policies. Communal responses were often beneficial to individual and communal social capital in the short term because they brought villagers together. Individual responses on the other hand, possibly played a negative role in the construction and maintenance of both forms of social capital, when people discontinued their former activities entirely. If people substituted former activities with new activities outside the village it did not necessarily have a negative impact on individual social capital. However, if the substitution behavior took place outside the village, communal social capital may well have been harmed.

¹ Author's observation: the third annual market attracted 15,000 visitors, the fourth, 20,000.

Figure 3. Inductive model of the role that responses to experiences of population decline play in communal and individual social capital



The experiences of loss related to population decline stirred feelings of regret among the participants in this study, most prominently in the more tangible losses of services and quality of living environment. They were also somewhat concerned that the quality of their village would further decrease in the future. Interestingly, it was found that these experiences did not constitute insurmountable problems. In general, initial worries about the changes were followed by acceptance and adaptation to the new situation. Furthermore, people had time to go through such a process, because population decline was experienced as evolving at a slow pace. It is therefore unlikely that population decline as such undermines individual or communal self-reliance. More important is the presence of people in a village who take the lead, backed up by a willing pool of volunteers. However, people are worried about how much more can be done voluntarily. They often have busy lives and not everybody in a rural village is willing to contribute. Decreasing investments by local governments and other institutions in the village are therefore of considerable concern, because it puts increasing pressure on already existent self-reliance. Nevertheless, inspiring communal activities were found in all of the villages.

A limitation of this study was its cross-sectional nature. Although it was found that experiences of population decline can play a role in individual and communal social capital over time, it is still rather unclear in which situations the impact on social capital is strongest. A recommendation for further research is therefore to do qualitative research into the role of population decline in social capital before and after a certain experience of population decline has occurred, for example the closure of a primary school. Another recommendation for future research is to gain more insight into which cases governments should aid active villagers who take the lead and when it is wise to step aside.

7.0 References

- Adger, W. N. (2000). Social and ecological resilience: are they related? *Progress in human geography*, 24(3), 347-364.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Barnett, R., & Barnett P. (2003). "If you want to sit on your butts you'll get nothing!" Community activism in response to threats of rural hospital closure in southern New Zealand. *Health & place*, 9(2), 59-71.
- Besser, T. L. (2009). Changes in small town social capital and civic engagement. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(2), 185-193.
- Bucher, H., & Mai, R. (2005). *Depopulation and its consequences for the regions of Europe*. Report prepared for the Council of Europe, Directorate General III-Social Cohesion, DG3/CAHP10(2005) 7 final.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social Capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 Supplement, 95-120.
- Coleman, D. & Rowthorn, R. (2011). Who's Afraid of Population Decline? A Critical Examination of Its Consequences. *Population and Development Review*, 37(1), 217-248.
- Cuba, L., & Hummon, D. (1993). A place to call home: Identification with dwelling, community, and region. *The sociological quarterly*, 34(1), 111-131.
- Edwards, B., & Foley, M. W. (2001). Civil Society and Social Capital: A Primer. In B. Edwards, M. Foley, and M. Diani (Eds.), *Beyond Tocqueville. Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective* (pp. 1-16). Hanover: Tufts University.
- Egelund, N., & Laustsen, H. (2006). School Closure: What are the consequences for the local society? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50(4), 429-439.
- Elshof, H., van Wissen, L. & Mulder, C. H. (2014). The self-reinforcing effects of population decline: An analysis of differences in moving behaviour between rural neighbourhoods with declining and stable populations. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 36(0), 285-299.
- Fagence, M. (1980). The provision of social and other services in areas experiencing depopulation. *Social Policy & Administration*, 14(2), 93-114.
- Falk, I., & Kilpatrick, S (2000). What is social capital? A study of interaction in a rural community. *Sociologia ruralis*, 40(1), 87-110.
- Flora, J. L. (1998). Social Capital and Communities of Place. *Rural Sociology*, 63(4), 481-506.
- Fournier, S. (2012). *Getting it right: assessing and building resilience in Canada's North: report May 2012*. Ottawa: Centre for the North.
- Forsythe, D. (1984). The social effects of primary school closure. In T. Bradley and P. Lowe (Eds.), *Locality and rurality: economy and society in rural regions*, Norwich: Geo Books.

- Glaeser, E., & Gyourko, J. (2005). Urban Decline and Durable Housing. *Journal of Political Economy*, 113(2), 345-375.
- Haartsen, T., & Venhorst, V. (2010). Planning for Decline: Anticipating on Population Decline in the Netherlands. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 101(2), 218-227.
- Halfacree, K. (1995). Talking about rurality: Social representations of the rural as expressed by residents of six English parishes. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 11(1), 1-20.
- Hammond, S., Norton, M., Schmidt, E., & Sokolow, A. (2010). California communities deal with conflict and adjustment at the urban-agricultural edge. *California agriculture*, 64(3), 121-128.
- Helliwell, J., & Putnam, R. (2004). The social context of well-being. *Philosophical transactions-royal society of London series B biological sciences*, 1435-1446.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative Research Methods*, Sage.
- Hirschman, A. (1970). *Exit, voice and loyalty. Responses to decline in firms, organizations and states*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.
- Kearns, R., Lewis, N., McCreanor, T., & Witten, K. (2009). 'The status quo is not an option': Community impacts of school closure in South Taranaki, New Zealand, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(1), 131-140.
- Latten J., Das, M., & Chkalova, K. (2008). De stad Groningen als roltrap van Noord-Nederland, *Bevolkingstrends 2008(2)*, Den Haag: Statistics Netherlands.
- Letki, N. (2008). Does diversity erode social cohesion? Social capital and race in British neighbourhoods. *Political Studies*, 56(1), 99-126.
- Lewicka, M. (2005). Ways to make people active: The role of place attachment, cultural capital, and neighborhood ties. *Journal of environmental psychology*, 25(4), 381-395.
- Matanle, P., & Rausch, A. (2011). *Japan's Shrinking Regions in the 21st Century: Contemporary responses to depopulation and socioeconomic decline*, Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
- Matanle, P., & Sato, Y. (2010). Coming soon to a city near you! Learning to live 'beyond growth' in Japan's shrinking regions. *Social Science Japan Journal*, 13(2), 187-210.
- Martinez-Fernandez, C., Kubo, N., Noya, A., & Weyman, T. (2012). *Demographic change and local development: shrinkage, regeneration and social dynamics*. OECD publishing.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24(1), 1-24.
- Purdue, D. (2001). Neighbourhood governance: Leadership, trust and social capital. *Urban Studies*, 38(12), 2211-2224.
- Putnam, R. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Putnam, R. (1995). Tuning in, tuning out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America. *Political Science & Politics*, 28(4), 664-683.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Reher, D. (2007). Towards long-term population decline: a discussion of relevant issues. *European Journal of Population/Revue européenne de Démographie*, 23(2), 189-207.
- Ryan, L., Sales, R., Tilki M., & Siara, B. (2008). Social networks, social support and social capital: The experiences of recent Polish migrants in London. *Sociology*, 42(4), 672-690.
- Statistics Netherlands (2014). *Statline*. Retrieved from <http://statline.cbs.nl>
- Steiner, A., & Markantoni, M. (2014). Unpacking community resilience through capacity for change. *Community Development Journal*, 49(3), 407-425.
- Stockdale, A. (2002). Towards a typology of out-migration from peripheral areas: a Scottish case study. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8(5), 345-364.
- Stockdale, A. (2004). Rural out-migration: community consequences and individual migrant experiences. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 44(2), 167-194.
- Van Dam, F., De Groot, C., & Verwest, F. (2006). *Krimp en Ruimte: Bevolkingsafname, Ruimtelijke Gevolgen en Beleid*. Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers.
- Van Dam, F., Heins, S., & Elbersen, B. (2002). Lay discourses of the rural and stated and revealed preferences for rural living. Some evidence of the existence of a rural idyll in the Netherlands. *Journal of Rural Studies* 18(4), 461-476.
- Van der Land, M., & Doff, W. (2010). Voice, exit and efficacy: dealing with perceived neighbourhood decline without moving out. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 25(4), 429-445.
- Wilding, K. (2011). Voluntary and community organisations. In N. Yeates, T. Haux, R. Jawad, M. Kilkey, and N. Timmins (Eds.), *In defence of welfare: the impacts of the comprehensive spending review*, Lincoln: Social Policy Association.
- Williams, C., & Windebank, J. (2000). Self-help and mutual aid in deprived urban neighborhoods: some lessons from Southampton. *Urban Studies*, 37(1), 127-147.
- Witten, K., McCreanor, T., & Kearns, R. (2003). The place of neighbourhood in social cohesion: Insights from Massey, West Auckland. *Urban Policy and research*, 21(4), 321-338.
- Woods, M. (2005). *Rural Geography*. Sage.
- Woolcock, M. (1998). Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework. *Theory and Society*, 27(2), 151-208.