

Reflections

Young people as agents in regional shrinkage – commentary to Syssner

MARIKA KETTUNEN AND EEVA-KAISA PROKKOLA



Kettunen, M. & Prokkola, E.-K. (2022) Young people as agents in regional shrinkage – commentary to Syssner. *Fennia* 200(2) 258–262. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.122487>

This paper reflects on Josefina Syssner’s Fennia lecture “What could geographers do for shrinking geographies”. In this commentary, we extend upon and complement Syssner’s inquiry by suggesting that to gain a better understanding of regional shrinkage and shrinking geographies it is important to ask the who question as well. Shrinkage and the policies used to deal with it impact different people in different ways, and people have different abilities to react to these changes or to take part in shaping the policies. In this reflection paper, we focus on a specific age group that is often considered important in regional development and policy discussions but that has been ignored in the debates on shrinking geographies – young people. In the end, we ask what geographers could do to increase the understanding of and possibilities for young people to live a good life in shrinking regions in times of environmental crises.

Keywords: young people, youth participation, shrinking regions, regional development, environmental crises

Marika Kettunen (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6067-569X>) and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3237-6953>), Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Finland. E-mail: marika.kettunen@oulu.fi, eeva-kaisa.prokkola@oulu.fi

Intertwined geographies of shrinking and geographies of young people

In her Fennia keynote lecture presented in the Nordic Geographers Meeting (NGM), Josefina Syssner touches upon the timely and societally relevant topic of shrinking geographies (see also Syssner 2022). With a focus on the Nordic states, Syssner brings to the fore various ways in which geographers and geographical inquiry could do for shrinking regions, for example, by providing information on what it means to live in shrinking rural regions and by making explicit the implicit geographical imaginations of shrinking and decline. Moreover, she elucidates how shrinkage is treated differently at different scales and in different places by various policy actors, both formal and informal. In so doing she raises important *what*, *when* and *where* questions related to shrinking regions, discussing them in light of current research findings as well as future research needs.

Aligned with Syssner’s thoughts, we concur that geographical inquiry in the context of shrinking regions or shrinkage entails a possibility to address this timely societal issue beyond the narrow focus

of shrinkage as a tool of governance. In order to do so, it is important that we also ask the *who* (see Kallio 2014), and take a closer look at those who are involved and those who are missing, those whose lives are affected by the shrinkage and policies used to deal with shrinkage and those whose perspectives are (or are not) heard in the current discussions.

With the *who* question in mind, this commentary extends the debate on shrinking geographies by highlighting the structural and symbolic significance of young people's agency with respect to shrinking regions. As Syssner mentions, young people and their mobility decisions are pivotal for rural regions. Although children and young people are a key group in state building and regional development trajectories, their perspectives are often ignored in political decision-making and regional research. At the same time, young people's decisions and opportunities to move or stay are often treated as the reason for regional shrinkage in the first place, as selective out-migration is linked to depopulation and reducing fertility rates. From this adultist perspective, which is prevalent in much of the literature concerning shrinking regions, young people are often regarded as an important age group to be taken into consideration merely for the sake of their role as future adults. The active agency of young people is rarely recognized.

Growing up in places shrinking or 'left behind'

Although there is little research that explicitly addresses young people in the context of shrinking geographies, there is a wide body of research concerning young people in rural and sparsely habited regions, offering insight into how young people live and negotiate belonging in these regions. As also Syssner brings forth, many sparsely habited regions in the Nordic countries have experienced declines in terms of accessibility to welfare services and educational opportunities. As municipalities have centralized their educational networks, many village and neighborhood schools have been closed. Syssner reminds us, importantly, how equal access to schooling and other public services is the core of the Nordic welfare state model. Hence, besides contributing to a vicious cycle of shrinkage in rural areas, the centralization of schooling also heightens the structural inequalities that frame young people's lives and possibilities. This is especially the case in an era when acquiring formal education is regarded as increasingly important (Kettunen & Prokkola 2022).

Another youth-related shrinkage question mentioned by Syssner concerns outmigration decisions. In sparsely habited and rural shrinking regions it is often young people and especially young women who choose to leave. Youth researchers have shed light on the complexities of staying in place or moving out and have argued that a certain mobility imperative for rural youth exists: outmigration from rural regions has become a culturally and structurally powerful norm among many rural young people (e.g. Farrugia 2016; Juvonen & Romakkaniemi 2019). For instance, gendered expectations and gendered possibilities can influence young people's decisions to stay or leave rural areas (e.g. Pöysä 2022). Corbett and Forsey (2017, 430) note how attitudes towards youth migration are contradictory as "youth are simultaneously encouraged and blamed as they are chided to aspire higher". In other words, there is both pressure to look beyond the immediate horizon (encouraged to aspire) and to stay in the home region (chided for wanting out).

Moreover, as geographers and others have shown, the imaginations of urban and rural play a crucial role in the mobility decisions of young people (e.g. Forsberg 2019). Sometimes living in a rural or remote shrinking place is considered stigmatizing and encourages the label 'left behind' (Wenham 2020). These geographical imaginations can influence young people's understanding of themselves, here and there, and contribute to their decision to out-migrate. Young people may grow up with the idea that there is no future for them in the shrinking region (see also Kettunen 2022). It seems that young people are caught in the middle of two conflicting narratives, the one highlighting regional vitality (collective wellbeing) and the other emphasizing personal success (personal wellbeing) (e.g. Komu & Adams 2021). It is therefore important that geographical research critically engages with the negative imaginaries and stereotypes of shrinking regions: how are the current development trajectories narrated, how is shrinkage or population decline articulated in the local communities, and what difference do these make for young people's sense of self and future plans?

Tackling shrinkage through youth engagement and participation?

The importance of engaging citizens and the local community has been highlighted in the context of both urban (Hospers 2014) and rural shrinkage (Kahila *et al.* 2022), yet to date there is little research that explicitly takes into consideration the active agency of young people in the context of shrinking regions or shrinkage. Young people are often viewed as targets of regional policy initiatives rather than as active agents of regional change. There are also different stances towards different groups and groupings of young people. The underaged young people in shrinking regions are the subject of various policies and practices ranging from formal education to initiatives that aim to foster young people's sense of belonging to their home region. Similarly, those who have left their home region and are now young adults are courted as potential returnees in regions that experience population decline (e.g. Rérat 2014). Young adults and their offspring are considered important for the tax revenues and vitality of the region. Top-down policy and research narratives, however, seldom recognize young people's agency but rather simplistically reduce young people into quantified numbers and figures.

In recent years, however, the importance of engaging young people in local and regional decision-making has been recognized. For example, in Kainuu, a shrinking region in rural eastern Finland, young women have been heralded as key actors in defining the future of the rural and sparsely habited region (Haanpää *et al.* 2021). They have been invited to take part in regional planning and policy making, arenas that are not traditionally characterized by young female agents. While the unspoken aim of such practices nevertheless seems to be to empower young people to tackle shrinkage, that is, to deal with predefined challenges and to increase regional vitality through enabling growth, these initiatives signify an important shift in thinking about young people and their role in shrinking regions. Young people are now more often seen as active agents both capable of and willing to take part in regional development (also Kettunen 2022).

Young people and shrinking geographies in times of environmental crises

In this commentary, we have noted how young people are often considered as future adults and how this 'future speech' puts various expectations on them. The emphasis on futurities also holds a possibility to look at shrinkage as an opportunity for change (see also Hospers & Reverda 2015). This is especially crucial in times when the ideal of (economic) growth does not neatly match with the pressing need to respond to environmental crises and transition towards climate-neutral societies. Lehtinen (2019), for example, has pointed out how shrinking geographies and the idea of shrinking in an economic sense (or degrowth, as Lehtinen calls it) has remained on the margins of geographical thought, despite the fact that such perspectives would be beneficial for rethinking the relationship between economy and wellbeing. In the context of shrinking regions and depopulation, the need for multiple transitions seems all the more urgent. Sustainable transitions cannot succeed unless the shrinkage policy is coupled with the 'leave no one behind' commitment (UNDP 2018). Thus, more knowledge is needed on how multiple transitions impact, and are impacted by, the actions of different groups and generations.

We propose that geographers do more to strengthen our understanding of young people's perspectives on shrinkage and to better recognize the agency of young people in local and regional development. The key question is to rethink what is meant by success or good life and to ensure that young people in shrinking places and regions have the possibility to live a good life despite the multiple crises and transitions. Future research could take into consideration young people's active role, participation or resistance towards top-down 'smart shrinking' initiatives, right-sizing or degrowth policies. In relation to the alternative perspectives and models on shrinkage that also Sysner underlines, it would also be important to investigate the ways in which young people might mobilize around, take part in, and renew multiple transition processes. Research could also illuminate the responses that young people's grassroots participation and engagement stirs up in the local communities: is the political agency of young people valued in the society (Skelton 2010) or are they considered unknowledgeable actors in their communities (Kettunen 2021).

We conclude that paying attention to young people's perspectives – and similarly to other groups or minorities whose perspectives have traditionally remained unheard in the arena of regional development – and asking the *who* question would enable a widening of the discussion regarding what shrinking regions and shrinkage means and who the relevant actors are considered to be. It is also important to bear in mind that young people are not a homogenous group. More inclusive policies and practices that recognize intersectionality and intersecting differences such as age, gender, race, place and class are needed to deal with the shrinkage in a socially and environmentally just manner.

References

- Corbett, M. & Forsey, M. (2017) Rural youth out-migration and education: challenges to aspirations discourse in mobile modernity. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 38(3) 429–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2017.1308456>
- Farrugia, D. (2016) The mobility imperative for rural youth: the structural, symbolic and non-representational dimensions of rural youth mobilities. *Journal of Youth Studies* 19(6) 836–851. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1112886>
- Forsberg, S. (2019) 'The right to immobility' and the uneven distribution of spatial capital: negotiating youth transitions in northern Sweden. *Social & Cultural Geography* 20(3) 323–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1358392>
- Haanpää, S., Koivisto, A., Lähteenmäki-Smith, K., Manu, S., Siltanen, K. & Komulainen, M. (2021) *Naisnäkökulmaa Kainuuseen*. Pilottihankkeen loppuraportti B:20. Regional Council of Kainuu, Kajaani. <<https://www.kajaani.fi/tiedostot/naisnakokulmaa-kainuuseen-loppuraportti/?1620661229>> 25.11.2022.
- Hospers, G. J. (2014) Policy responses to urban shrinkage: from growth thinking to civic engagement. *European Planning Studies* 22(7) 1507–1523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2013.793655>
- Hospers, G. J. & Reverda, N. (2015) *Managing Population Decline in Europe's Urban and Rural Areas*. Springer International, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-12412-4>
- Juvonen, T. & Romakkaniemi, M. (2019) Between mobility and belonging: the meanings of locality among youth in Lapland in the transition to adulthood. *YOUNG* 27(4) 321–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308818791672>
- Kahila, P., Hirvonen, T., Jolkkonen, A., Kurvinen, A., Lemponen, V., Makkonen, T., Rautiainen, S., Copus, A., Teräs, J., Turunen, E., Lebbing, J., Vester L. & Meijer, M. (2022) *Mitä on älykäs sopeutuminen?* Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 2022:42. Prime minister's office, Helsinki. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-173-5>
- Kallio, K. P. (2014) Who is the subject of political action. *ACME* 13(3) 428–433. <<https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1016>> 25.11.2022
- Kettunen, M. (2021) "We need to make our voices heard": claiming space for young people's everyday environmental politics in northern Finland. *Nordia Geographical Publications* 49(5) 32–48. <https://doi.org/10.30671/nordia.98115>
- Kettunen, M. (2022) "I have already imagined myself elsewhere" A bottom-up perspective on youth outmigration. In Yeasmin, N., Uusiautti, S., Koivurova, T., & Heleniak, T. (eds.) *The Future of the Arctic Human Population: Migration in the North*, 145–161. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185024>
- Kettunen, M. & Prokkola, E.-K. (2022) Differential inclusion through education: reforms and spatial justice in Finnish education policy. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40(1) 50–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544211001383>
- Komu, T., & Adams, R.-M. (2021) Not wanting to be "stuck": exploring the role of mobility for young people's wellbeing in Northern Finland. In Stammler, F. & Toivanen, R. (eds.) *Young People, Wellbeing and Placemaking in the Arctic*, 32–52. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003110019-4>
- Lehtinen, A. (2019) Tahtomattaan radikaali: talouden supistumisen maantiede. *Terra* 131(4) 235–246. <<https://terra.journal.fi/article/view/83468>> 25.11.2022.
- Pöysä, V. (2022) *Syrjäseudun pojat: tutkimus paikasta, materiasta ja maskuliinisuudesta aikuistuvien poikien elämässä*. Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies No. 279. University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-4608-9>
- Réat, P. (2014) Highly qualified rural youth: why do young graduates return to their home region? *Children's Geographies* 12(1) 70–86 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.850849>
- Skelton, T. (2010) Taking young people as political actors seriously: opening the borders of political geography. *Area* 42 145–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2009.00891.x>

- Syssner, J. (2022) What could geographers do for shrinking geographies? *Fennia* 200(2) 98–119. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.120536>
- UNDP (2018) *What Does It Mean to Leave No One Behind?* A UNDP discussion paper and framework for implementation. July 2018. <<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/what-does-it-mean-to-leave-no-one-behind-.html>> 25.11.2022.
- Wenham, A. (2020) “Wish you were here”? Geographies of exclusion: young people, coastal towns and marginality. *Journal of Youth Studies* 23(1) 44–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1704408>