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TARGETED ANALYSIS//

RURALPLAN – Innovative planning in shrinking societies

Final report // November 2024

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Abbreviations

CASPER	Citizen Activation in Shrinking rural areas for Place-based policies to Enhance Resilience
ESCAPE	European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance
FSO	Federal Statistical Office (Switzerland)
GIS	Geographical Information Systems
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PROFECY	Processes Features and Cycles of Inner Peripheries in Europe
RDI	Research Development and Innovation project
RUPIL	Rural Planning and Innovation Lab
RUSTIK	Rural Sustainability Transitions through Integration of Knowledge for improved policy processes
SCB	Statistics Sweden
SSB	Statistics Norway

Preface by Ulla Higdem

We are happy to present this Final Report from the Targeted Analysis RURALPLAN - Innovative planning in Shrinking Societies, in which we propose a new mindset and method for planning and development in rural areas that are experiencing challenging demographic situations.

We thank the three pilot cases that have offered excellent testing conditions in relevant territorial and planning contexts, on actual challenges, and with engaged political and administrative leadership and management, along with local and regional participants. The cooperation with the Albula region in Switzerland, Malung-Sälen municipality in Sweden, and Os municipality in Norway has been central to the success in this project.

This project has taken place on the basis of sound and mutually shared cooperation with the SECO of Switzerland, the Dalarna County of Sweden, the Innlandet County of Norway, the EUROMONTANA, and the ESPON EGTC. In cooperation with all interests, it has been interesting and exciting to take part in practice-led research and innovation projects.

Finally, we hope theory and practice in this manner have supported the development of the RUPIL model, yielding advice for further diffusion and insights into implementation that can be applied in strategic planning practices. We also look forward to the further development of RURALPLAN.

Ulla Higdem,
Professor, University of Inland Norway

Foreword by Stakeholders

Small places and rural areas hold a special place in the hearts of Europeans, hosting significant populations and forming vital parts of Europe's economic fabric, history, and identity. However, with a declining European demography, many rural communities face decreasing populations.

The ESPON RURALPLAN initiative, involving stakeholders from Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and EUROMONTANA, aims to mitigate the negative effects of demographic changes and explore new paths for local communities by mobilizing their collective competence and determination. Inspired by previous ESPON research and EU processes like the Territorial Agenda 2030 and the EU Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, the initiative focuses on enhancing strategic planning as a key leadership tool.

Stakeholders identified a lack of planning models for areas with shrinking populations. The main goal of the ESPON RURALPLAN project was to develop an inclusive planning model that promotes innovative outcomes. In 2024, stakeholders collaborated with a European research consortium led by the University of Inland Norway and the ESPON EGTC secretariat.

The new model was tested in Os municipality (Norway), Malung-Sälen municipality (Sweden), and the Albula region (Switzerland), under different national planning frameworks. The energy and creativity of local stakeholders during the pilots were outstanding, resulting in innovative outcomes.

We are pleased to introduce the RUPIL (RUral Planning and Innovation Lab) model to the European planning scene. While it can be used as a self-service tool, it works best with trained staff support. The stakeholder group extends gratitude to the research consortium, ESPON EGTC, and all participants in the pilots for their excellent cooperation during the RURALPLAN project.

December 2024

Hamar/Falun/Bern/Brussels

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Innlandet County, Norway	Länsstyrelsen Dalarna, Sweden	Secrétariat d'Etat, Switzerland	EUROMONTANA
(lead stakeholder)			

Summary

This RURALPLAN project provides a theoretical and practical framework for innovative strategic planning for development without (population) growth. This perspective constructively addresses the complex challenges of such areas without placing the stigma of 'failing to grow' on local and regional entities and societies. Such a change of mindset is challenging in traditional planning terms when development equals growth.

To handle these challenges, the RURALPLAN project has tested, analysed and further developed the Rural Planning and Innovation Model (RUPIL). The RUPIL is designed to support local and regional master/strategic planning and to support innovative responses to demographic challenges in rural areas. It has been tested in three pilot case areas in respectively Sweden, Switzerland and Norway. This process has provided the participants with innovative, yet realistic input into their planning activities.

Strategies derived from each pilot case can be organised into three main categories: strategies related to the concepts of living good lives, strategies directed at dealing with demographic change, including shifts in resource allocation for public services and investments, and strategies that aim to counteract current developments.

The testing of the RUPIL shows that the model underlines the importance of the local context and emphasizes knowledge-based processes. This helps to support place-based and tailor-made strategies. Analysis of the test suggests that the model helps to shift the paradigm away from growth towards setting more realistic expectations. The model offers a low threshold to engage with a practical approach that can be used to empower planning authorities in rural areas all over Europe.

Based on analysis and feedback from the participants in the case areas, RURALPLAN has adjusted the model to a revised RUPIL more suited to meeting its goals in a more efficient manner. In addition, the project team has designed an educationally revised RUPIL with an integrated toolbox to meet the needs of planning practitioners.

Finally, RURALPLAN proposes policy recommendations, such as the need to realistically integrate demographic changes and focus on accepting shrinkage as part of the planning process. The aim is to disassociate shrinkage from failure and to promote sustainable local development. A broad participation is essential for this process and collaboration between various local actors is encouraged. The RUPIL can be a vital tool for developing innovative solutions, but it's crucial to possess the knowledge and competence to facilitate the RUPIL process and understand the local context in which it's used. A practical taskforce for planning at the regional or national level is recommended.

1 Introduction

Currently, 40% of the population in Europe already lives in a shrinking region, where shrinking means population decline and/or aging. This especially impacts rural regions, where natural decline and continued urbanization are expected to accelerate even more shrinking in these areas. Policy challenges in terms of for example labor market shortages, fiscal sustainability, infrastructure provision, and access to services, follow by this development. Local planning is crucial in this situation to meet these changes and to find new and innovative strategies and solutions. So far, much of local planning has not adequately addressed these changes, and there is a lack of approaches and models for dealing with demographic changes in a realistic and innovative way.

This Targeted Analysis RURALPLAN - Innovative Planning in Shrinking Societies, therefore provides evidence of how strategic planning regarding rural areas can respond to shrinking, by developing, testing, and adjusting a model for knowledge-based strategic planning and policymaking in what is called the RUPIL, Rural Planning and Innovation Lab. To do so, we based the model on the diverse challenges faced by three focused areas, or 'Pilot Cases', which included Os municipality in Norway (Innlandet), Malung-Sälen municipality in Sweden (Dalarna), and the Albula region in Switzerland (Graubünden). Hence, RURALPLAN was designed and implemented as a Research, Development, and Innovation project (RDI). RURALPLAN contributes to innovative strategic planning regarding how rural areas may respond in new ways to demographic changes. Hence, RURALPLAN combines a theoretical framework of innovative planning with the development of a model designed to activate and facilitate a new type of planning in practice. It entails a new mindset for development within a plausible demographic future, also characterized as development without population growth.

The overall research questions in RURALPLAN are:

1. Overlaying on the economic and demographic trends, how do local and regional planning authorities in Europe handle rural shrinking? (RURALPLAN Report on Methodological framework and knowledge, ESPON 2024).
2. How to improve the response to shrinking and aging in rural areas, including the approach to smart shrinking in general and how this could be applied in the stakeholders' areas? (RURALPLAN Report on Methodological framework and knowledge, ESPON 2024).
3. How can local master planning and strategic planners co-create new policy responses in a democratic and fair manner and with all stakeholders involved (citizens, local and regional authorities, private sector, enterprises etc.)? Which model can be suitable for fostering knowledge-based and innovative local and regional planning? (Testing the Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, RUPIL, ESPON 2024).

4. What strategies can be used by local and regional policymakers to ensure that shrinking and aging rural areas become as inclusive, resilient, and attractive as possible? (RURALPLAN Policy Brief, ESPON 2024 and this Final report).

These questions were divided into three main tasks, for which a report or brief was created:

A. Methodological framework and literature review on strategic local planning in shrinking rural areas (RURALPLAN ESPON Report, 2024a),
B. A model for innovative planning and policymaking (RURALPLAN ESPON Report, 2024 b), and
C. A policy brief on innovative planning model for rural shrinking territories (RURALPLAN ESPON Brief 2024).

This RURALPLAN Final report is organised as follows: First, in Chapter 2 we account for the framework of the RURALPLAN project which addresses the complexity of the demographic challenges, which severely impact rural eras. Hence, our basis lies within a realistic and innovative local and regional public planning conception of the future, which we choose to elaborate further theoretically in this chapter. RURALPLAN's mixed methods are presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 explains the final results of the quantitative analysis and the literature review. The results from the RUPIL testing are described in Chapter 5, and we also present the revised RUPIL model and discuss its possibilities and challenges. Chapter 6 accounts for the consolidated conclusions and recommendations of the RUPIL project.

2 Framework

The complexity of shrinking is properly addressed by ESPON's ESCAPE project (2020 a, b). Rural areas today face several economic, social, and environmental sustainability challenges. For many rural municipalities, the combination of population decline, ageing populations, low population density, an expected reduction in economic activity, and stronger competition for labour, presents novel challenges for municipalities to fulfil their roles as community developers and service providers.

Our position in this project is that the tight coupling between growth (in population) and development needs to be de-coupled, meaning that it is possible to plan and create (sustainable) societal development in shrinking regions without population growth. This point of view calls for a new mindset towards strategic planning and policymaking, reflecting broader societal objectives than economic growth (ESPON 2020a), such as inclusion, well-being, and just service provision.

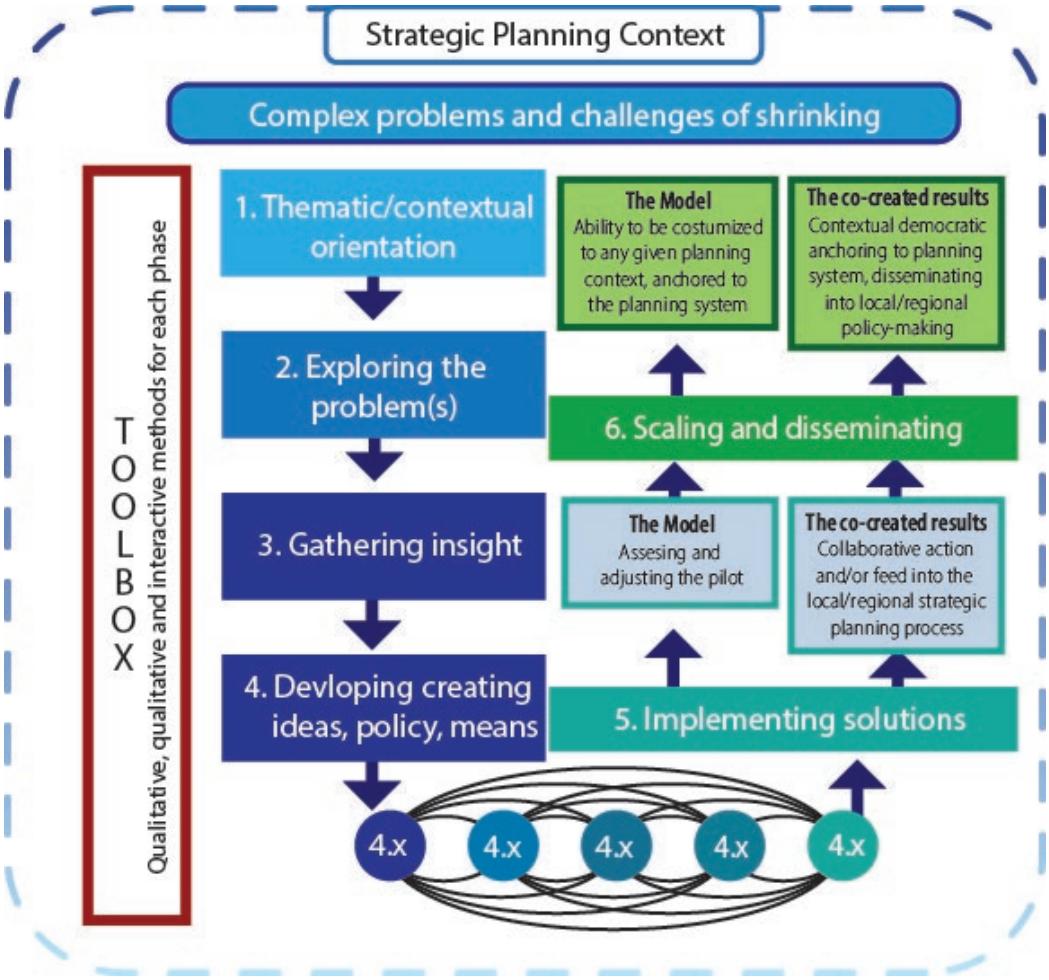
We have answered ESPON's call for practical guidance and support for local action (ESPON 2020a) by developing an innovative planning method, the Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, RUPIL, which breaks with established planning practices, where population growth is considered a prerequisite for development. RUPIL is tested in close collaboration between researchers, local governments, and stakeholders. Also, planning incorporating shrinking as a premise, needs to co-create with the existing local population and actors, with the goal of adapting it to the place-specific context. In addition, co-creation occupies a vital position in securing legitimacy and knowledge, along with an acceptance that shrinking and demographic challenges are a guiding premise contributing to the results of the RUPIL process.

The analytical model of RUPIL is presented in Figure 2.1. This model is framed within a strategic planning context and designed to support local (or regional) authorities in their strategic master planning and to facilitate planning based on more realistic assumptions about the demographic challenges. As RUPIL, is a democratic, participatory instrument, we have expanded on basic methods with a transdisciplinary approach, which is in line with the framework of innovative planning. The model consists of 6 phases; 1) thematic and contextual orientation, 2) exploring the problem(s), 3) gathering insight, 4) developing and creating new ideas, policy or means[1], 5) implementing solutions and 6) scaling and dissemination. In addition, an accompanying Toolbox to guide facilitators has been developed, which also is a part of the project. The phases are described in more detail in Chapter 5.

The phase 4 also contains testing-loops of prototypes, which is to be adjusted. These loops are illustrated as 4X in the RUPIL-model 2.1 below.

The analytical model is divided into two strands in phase 5. The strand to the right follows the co-created results of the process during the project and is followed in phase 6, which shows how the co-created results are anchored into the planning system and disseminated into local and regional policymaking in the three pilot cases. The strand to the left concerns the evaluation and assessment of the model itself. In Chapter 5 we present the final results of the testing, how the model is improved as a consequence of the pilot testing, and finally, we discuss the possibilities and challenges including upscaling and diffusion.

Figure 2.1
The original RUPIL model



Source: Eide, Wedum, Higdem, Tholstrup, Overvåg og Bern 2023

2.1 Innovative planning

Our point of departure is the development within the innovative theoretical understanding of planning (Hagen & Higdem 2020 a), where innovative planning is

concerned with systematic, territorial, societal, and co-produced change. It breaks with established practices and seeks to legitimize new social objectives or effect a major reprioritization of existing objectives. (Hagen &Higdem 2020 a, 5).

To enhance place-based, democratic, and participatory innovative planning, we recognize that what is innovative is a way that challenges and breaks with established practices or seeks new social objectives and will differ between contexts. Hence, it is *where* the innovation (goal, strategy, policy, measure) happens that is important, not if a similar phenomenon has occurred before in another context. Consequently, the idea of "borrowing", or getting inspired by ideas for subsequently adapting them to other and new contexts, is innovation.

It is important to note that innovation has the potential to both succeed as well as fail. This element of uncertainty separates innovation from work on development and change (Hartley 2005, Osborne & Brown 2011). Furthermore, innovation in the public sector is not limited to services or products, but may also be reflected in processes, organisations, policy, and governance (Moore and Hartley 2008, Crosby et al. 2017). This is important for planning purposes, since planning may spur innovation in each of these areas, including the form of planning itself, and has the potential to contribute to public value. Results of public value may be created and achieved as a collective effort of societal improvement within policies and strategies approved by public authorities in a given territorial context (Hagen & Higdem, 2020 a, 17).

Innovative planning is interactive, as innovations are most often created through collaborations between diverse actors (Edquist 2005, Healey 2006, Powell & Grodal 2005), and the output is co-produced (Albrechts 2012).

This focus on interaction will naturally bring out the underlying theories guiding the actions of participants, including intentions and interpretations. This might result in the emergence of new kinds of agents driving change. Innovative planning comprises a broadened and context-sensitive understanding of a society's planning capacity, wherein citizens, societal organizations, and businesses can contribute to the total capacity (Syssner & Meijer 2020).

Depopulating rural municipalities increasingly engages societal actors in planning practice to increase local governments' contextual knowledge and competence in planning, as well as to help mobilize the society's net resources for development. This is a vital perspective for regions experiencing demographic challenges, with scarce planning resources and competence.

Because innovative planning is value-based and democratically anchored, politicians must manage and steer public strategic societal planning (Hagen & Higdem 2020b). Politicians may take an interactive role (Sørensen 2016) in innovative planning. However, research shows politicians face a number of challenges in doing this (Sønderskov 2019). With this in mind, rural societal planning must absorb and apply positively the inherent ideological contradictions of politics, harnessing political

conflicts as sources of development and innovation (Hagen & Higdem 2020). Planning can thus become a political tool for innovation in the politics and policies of public value (Hartley, Sørensen, & Torfing 2013, Higdem 2017). The forms of democracy in which innovative planning exists include the new democratic forms of governance (Osborne 2010) that have developed from perspectives of participatory co-production and co-creation of planning (Agger & Sørensen 2016, Higdem 2014, Mäntysalo 2002). Politicians take on new roles. These new forms encompass deliberative and participatory approaches. In traditional liberal democratic states such as Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway, government and governance exist side by side in planning situations (Hanssen Sandkjær 2012, Higdem & Sandkjær Hanssen 2014).

3 Methodological approach

The methodological design of RUPIL consists of mixed methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), where each contributes to enlightening, informing, facilitating, analyzing, and understanding the different parts of the RUPIL project within a wider understanding and context. As such, we have applied quantitative methods including the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS), to analyze the situation of each case and their context in the following main areas; demography, economy, and geography, using accessible and relevant databases.

Secondly, we have conducted a literature review (Booth et al. 2022) on papers, policies, and projects dealing with rural depopulation, and the planning and process aspects of population decline in the last 10 years. The review included academic literature as well as reports on projects, cases, etc. Wherever possible, we focussed on publications containing evaluations of actual planning and development processes. The research considered focuses mainly on Europe as this is the most relevant context.

Thirdly, we have analysed current strategies and responses and future planning needs and approaches in the three pilot cases. Here we build on relevant planning documents, at local and regional levels, and interviews with local key actors.
Finally, we have conducted and facilitated the testing of RUPIL in three planning cases across different rural contexts: the Albula region (consisting of several municipalities) in Switzerland, the Malung- Sälen municipality in Sweden, and the Os municipality in Norway. The pilot cases were selected after discussions on relevance, planning status, and the public authority's interest in participating. Hence, it was vital that the RUPIL testing could contribute to and feed into the planning activity of each pilot case. Accordingly, the three cases were chosen in collaboration with the stakeholders from the SECO in Switzerland, Dalarna County in Sweden, and Innlandet County in Norway. Finally, the pilot cases were selected on the basis that they represented challenges faced by a diverse, cross-cutting array of different planning contexts and shrinkage situations, thus increasing the planning model's transferability to other European regions.

RURALPLAN had two facilitator's teams, one for Switzerland and one for Sweden and Norway. The teams were skilled facilitators, which together with the active pilot cases, was important for the testing's success. We arranged a facilitator's workshop over two days in Lillehammer, Norway where we introduced and discussed the design recommendations for RUPIL with project collaborators and arrived at a common understanding to ensure the similar implementation of the model across the three cases. Through the facilitation of RUPIL in the pilots we have been able to utilise our competence and knowledge as researchers in the planning situation of each case, as well as take on the role of facilitators of the RUPIL process in collaboration. In this way we have adopted the traditional researchers' role with an objective viewpoint using our knowledge, while also taking on the role of action

researchers collaborating with politicians, public administrators, NGO's, business actors, and other interest groups like youths.

The RUPIL model is evaluated by; a) summing up sessions with the key staff involved in each case, b) a questionnaire to all workshop participants, c) workshop documentation including maps, pictures, and written material, and finally d) the case report was discussed in a draft version with the stakeholders of RURALPLAN.
Through *research and innovation projects*, like RURALPLAN, researchers, practitioners, several types of stakeholders and other interested parties co-created systematic knowledge, (Hölscher et al., 2021) Greenhalgh et al., 2016).

You may read more on the method in detail in the reports on the Methodological framework and literature review on strategic local planning in shrinking rural areas (RURALPLAN ESPON Report, 2024 a), and the Case report (RURALPLAN ESPON Report, 2024 b).

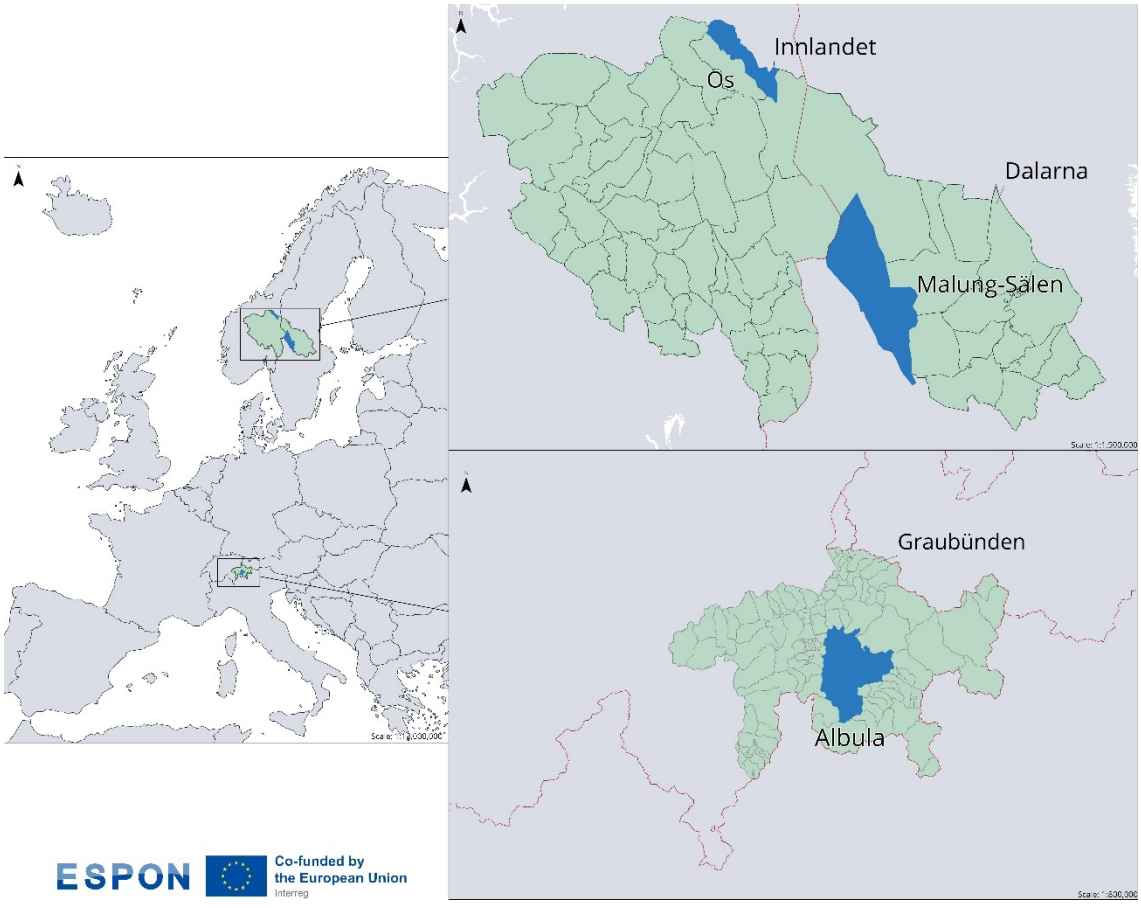
4 Final results of the analysis and maps

The result of the quantitative analysis, the analysis of planning status in the three cases as well as the literature review on planning responses to demographic challenges or shrinking in rural areas, have informed the RUPIL-process and increased the overall understanding of the contextual situation and the vital challenges ahead. Additionally, the literature review drew upon and contributed to insights into contemporary European academic literature. These results are presented in detail in the report on the methodological framework and literature review of strategic local planning in shrinking rural areas (RURALPLAN ESPON Report, 2024 a).

4.1 Quantitative analysis of the context's

This analysis has used regional data (Graubünden, Dalarna, Innlandet) and local data (Albula, Malung-Sälen, Os). The specific data presented depends on relevance and availability. Map 4.1 shows the location of the three pilot-cases within their countries and regions.

Map 4.1
Case study areas in Switzerland (Albula), Sweden (Malung-Sälen) and Norway (Os)



Source: Authors own elaboration

4.1.1 Demography

Population changes over the last decades shows great variations between our case regions (table 4.1). Dalarna was the only region which shrank up to 2011, while it has ceased in the last decade. Malung-Sälen as a place within in this region exhibited the same development, although with severe shrinkage up until 2011 (as the only one of the three pilot-cases). Sweden's population has grown steadily throughout the period. However, a national slowdown in growth means the disparity in population development between Malung-Sälen and the rest of the country is less pronounced than in previous decades.

In Graubünden and Albula within this region have had a strong population growth up until 2011, but growth has slowed down over the last decade. Albula's population has declined in recent years, contrasting sharply with the population growth experienced in both Graubünden and Switzerland.

In Norway, both in the region of Innlandet and Os within this region have historically had low population growth, but since 2011 Os has had a significant decline, while Innlandet still shows minor growth. This is substantially different from the national population development which shows a continuous growth in the whole period.

Compared to Europe, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway have had higher population growth. The development taking place in our selected cases, does however illustrate large regional variations within countries, with their shrinking or stabilized population development. In this, they do however share a certain commonality with several other regions in Europe (ESPON 2020a).

Projections for total population in 2050 show that a stable development of total population numbers is expected in all three regions (Graubünden, Dalarna, Innlandet). However, for Os and Malung-Sälen, the situation is different, where a decrease of respectively 8% and 5% is expected. There is no specific projection for Albula.

Table 4.1
Historic and recent total population change in percentage

	1961-2011	2011-2021	2022	2023
Europe/EU	22,5 (1)	1,5 (1)	0,0 (2)	0,4 (2)
Norway	36,9	9,6	0,6	1,2
Sweden	25,6	10,2	0,7	0,3
Switzerland	46,2	9,0	0,8	0,9
Innlandet, NO	10,1	4,1	0,2	0,6
Dalarna, SE	-3,1	2,2	0,0	-0,4
Graubünden, CH	36,1	4,3	0,6	0,6
Os, NO	2,2	-8,6	-0,8	-0,6
Malung-Sälen, SE	21,1	-0,4	0,4	0,0
Albula, CH	29,5	0,8	-0,4	0,8

(1): Based on data from World Bank Open Data, variable SP.POP.TOTL. (2) Eurostat 2024 (demo gind)
Source: SSB, SCB, FSO, Eurostat

Population in working age is an important variable for a balanced population distribution (table 4.2). In all three regions (Innlandet, Dalarna, Graubünden) this share has been decreasing. This also applies for Malung-Sälen and Albula. Os has had a slight increase from 2011, but the absolute share is the lowest of all, at 57%. Such a decrease occurs also on European and national levels, but the absolute share of population in working age is significantly higher than in the pilot-cases.

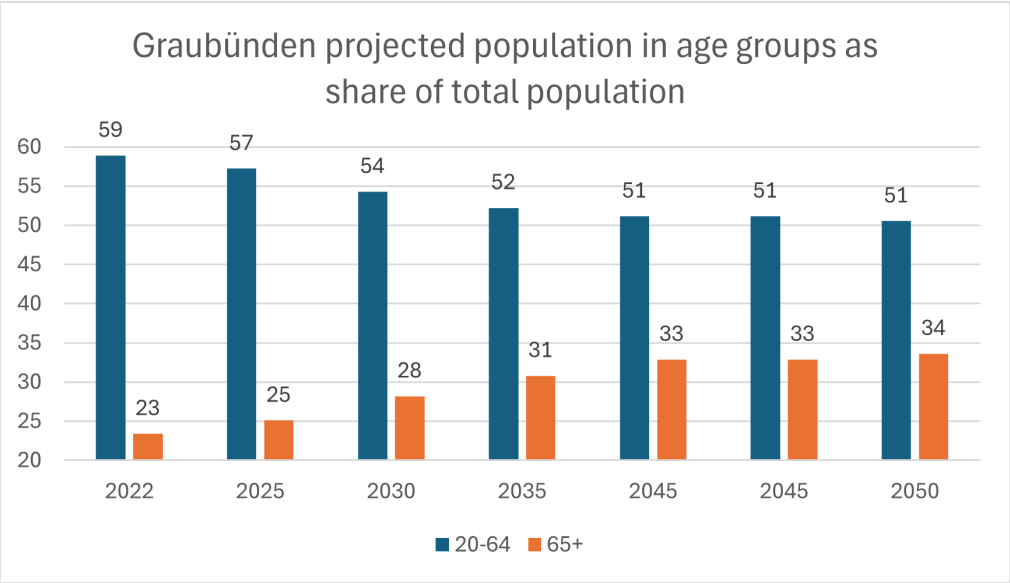
Table 4.2
Working age, share of population in percentage

	Total change in working age (15-64) share of population (%)	Working age (15-64) share of total population (%)
	2011-2021	2021
European Union	-0,1	66,7
Norway	-1,8	64,9
Sweden	-4,2	62,2
Switzerland	-2,7	66,1
Innlandet, NO	-3,0	62,3
Dalarna, SE	-7,6	58,2
Graubünden, CH	-5,1	64,9
Os, NO	2,8	57,1
Malung-Sälen, SE	-5,0	59
Albula, CH	-7,9	62

Source: SSB, SCB, FSO, World Bank Open Data (for European Union aggregate)

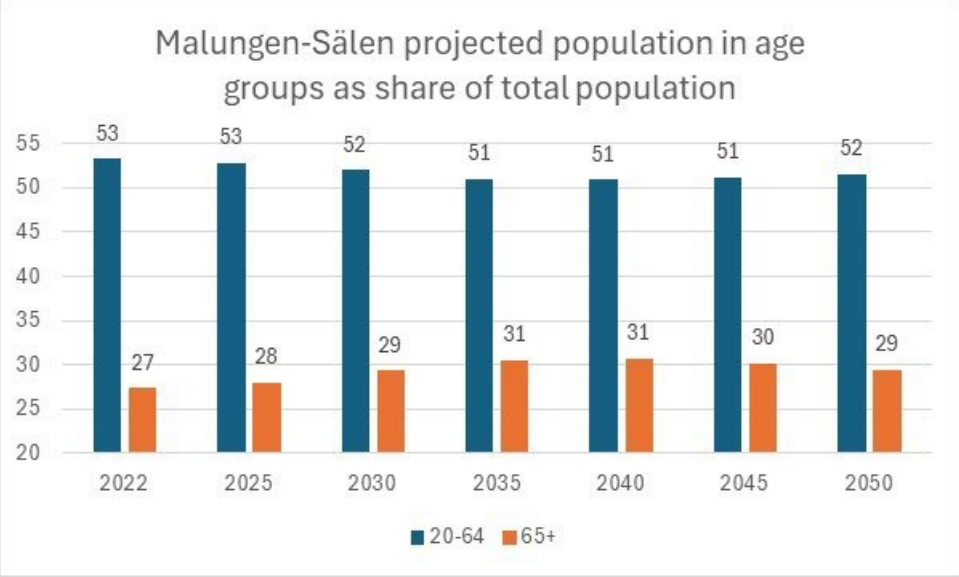
Projections for this variable show a significant decrease in people of working age and an increase in older people in Graubünden and Os (figure 4.1. and 4.3), while it is expected to be more stable in Malung-Sälen (figure 4.2). There is no specific projection for Albula for this variable.

Figure 4.1
Projected population in age groups, Graubünden, Switzerland



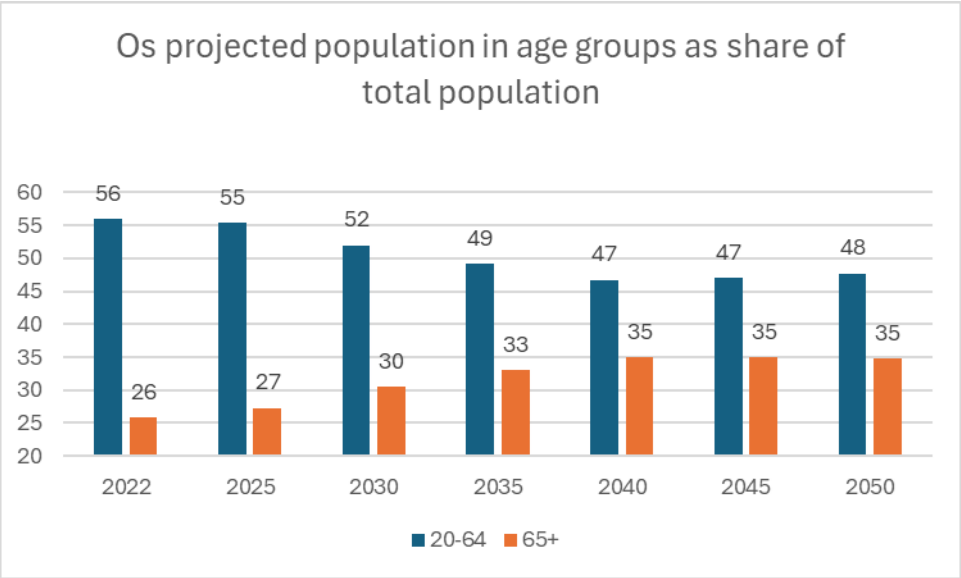
Source: FSO

Figure 4.2
Projected population in age groups, Malung-Sälen, Sweden



Source: SCB

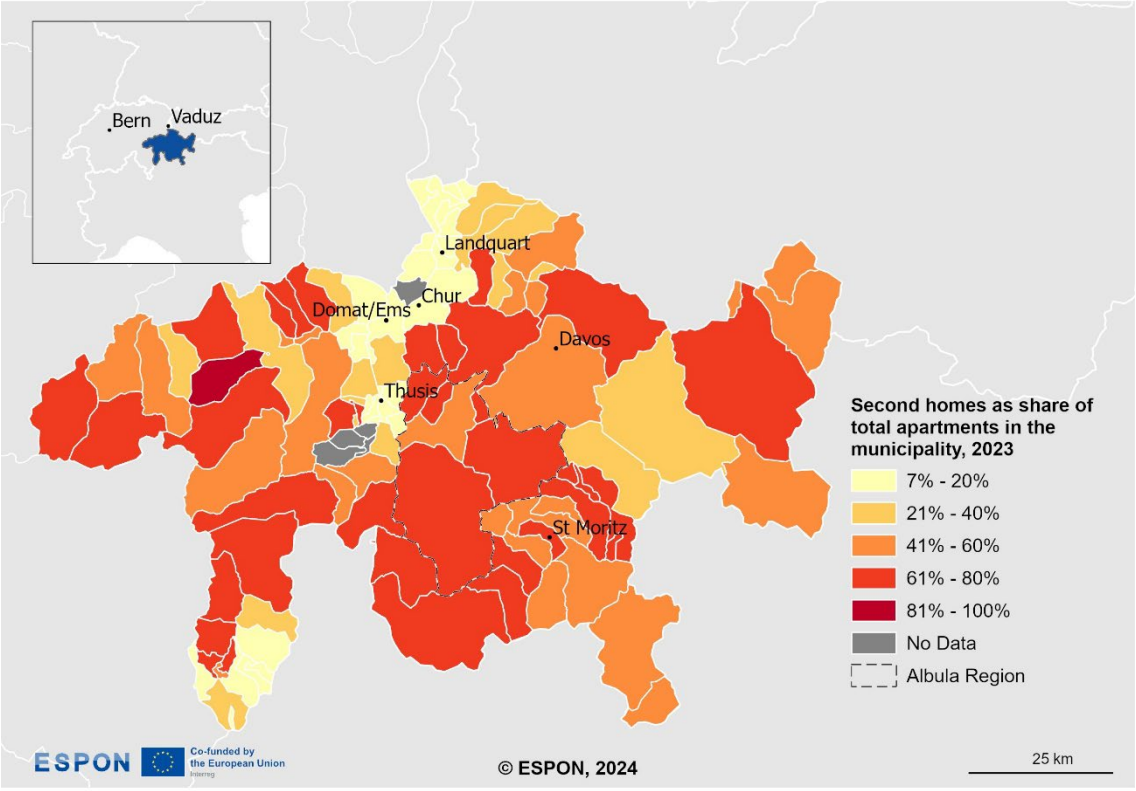
Figure 4.3
Projected population in age groups, Os in Norway



Source: SSB

The demographic statistics discussed above are related to the people who have their registered addresses in the regions and municipalities. For many rural municipalities in Europe the existence of second homes significantly impacts the degrees to which people live or stay in these regions for periods of time each year.

Map 4.2
Second homes, Graubünden, Switzerland

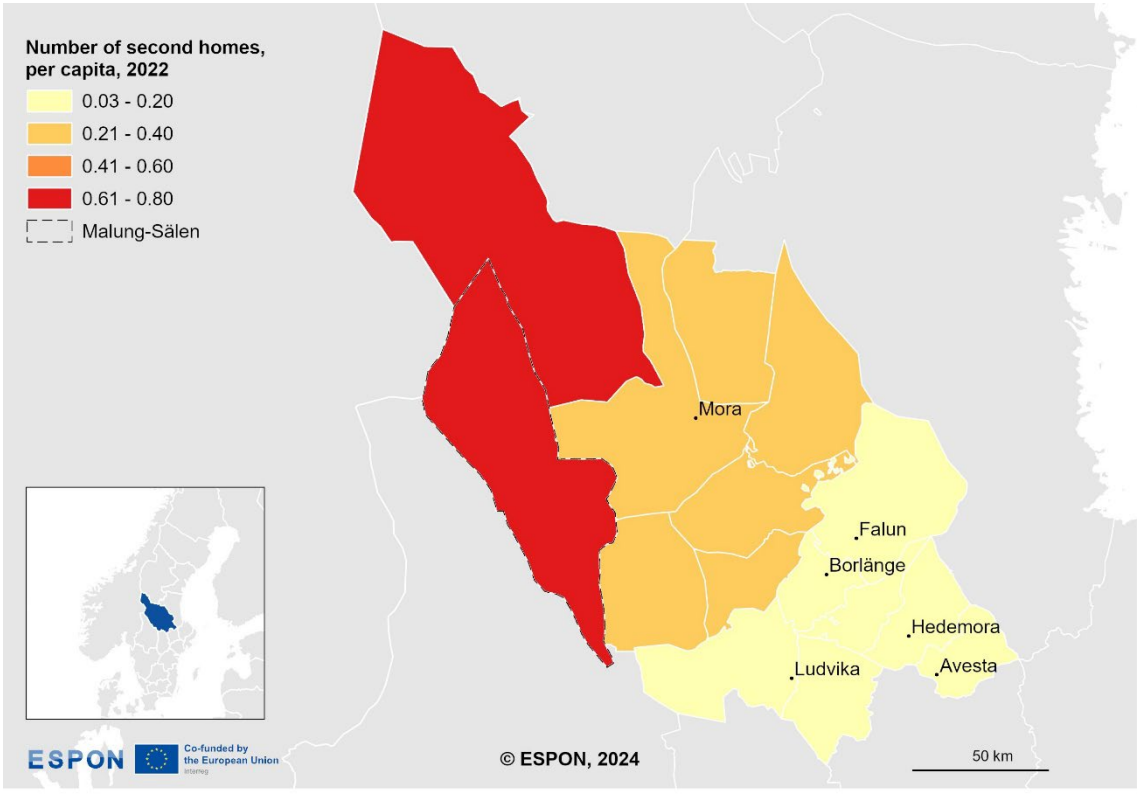


Territorial level: LAU (2021)
ESPON project: RURALPLAN
Origin of data: Bundesamt für Raumentwicklung ARE/ SwissTopo/Eurostat (2024)
© EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Source: Bundesamt für Raumentwicklund ARE/Swiss Topo/Eurostat (2024)

As map 4.2. shows, in many of the municipalities in Graubünden the share of second homes is high, especially in municipalities with no larger cities. This also applies for Albula, where in total 58,5% of all houses are used as second homes.

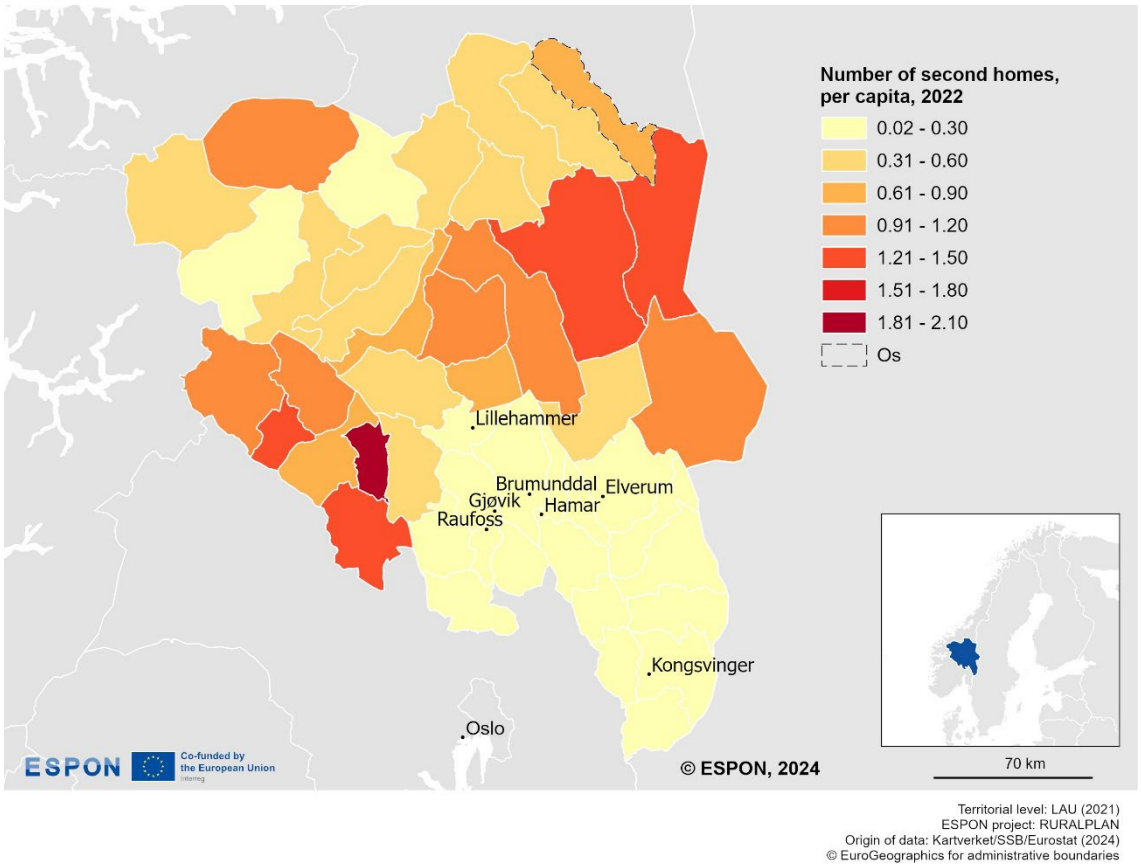
Map 4.3
Second homes, Dalarna, Sweden



Source: SCB/Eurostat (2024)

In Malung-Sälen there is 0,74 second homes per capita, which is significantly higher than most other municipalities in Dalarna (0,16 in Dalarna on average), especially the more populated areas west and south of Malung-Sälen. The high numbers in Malung-Sälen can be connected to the fact that Sälen is a tourist destination. It is one of the largest ski-destinations in the Nordic countries.

Map 4.4
Second homes, Innlandet, Norway



Source: Kartverket/SSB/Eurostat (2024)

In Os there are 0,64 second homes per capita. This is relatively high compared to the average for Innlandet (0,24), while there are several other rural municipalities in Innlandet with more second homes per capita than in Os. This can among other be related to Os being further away from major urban areas in Norway than several other rural territories in Innlandet.

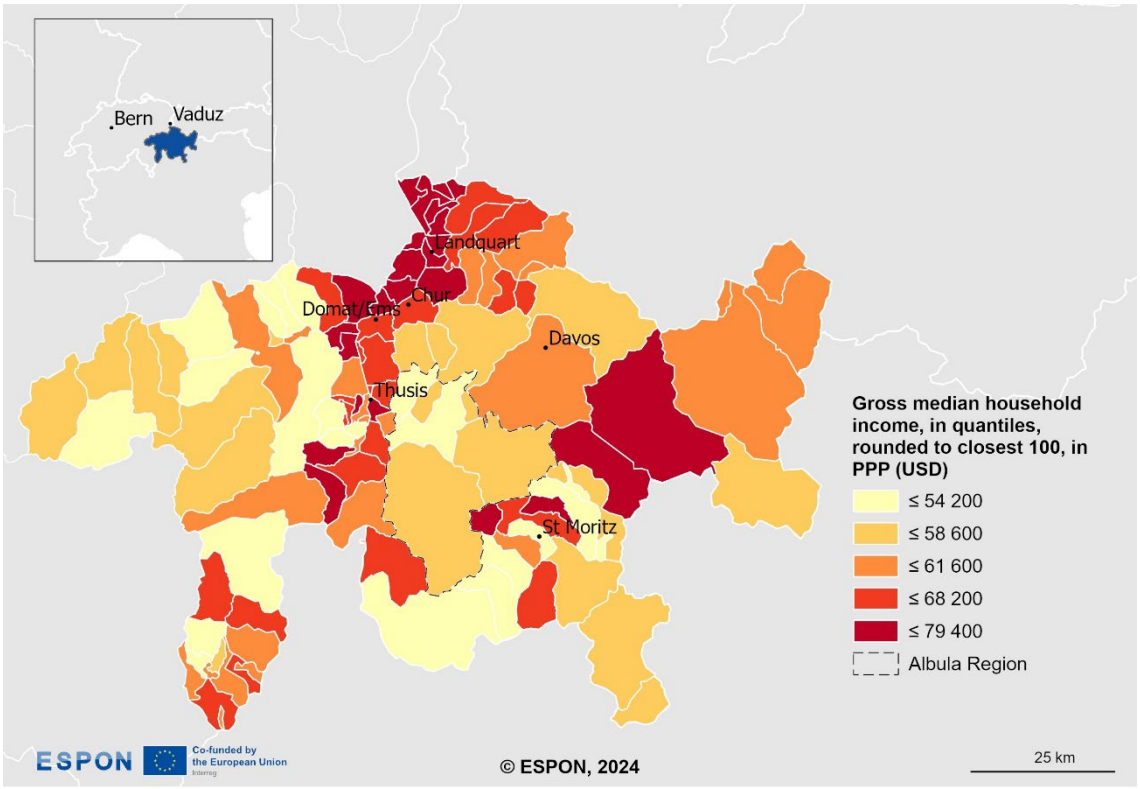
The significant presence of second homes in all of the three pilot-cases means that in some periods of the year there are substantially more people living there, than indicated by the demographic statistics. This can have important impacts, for example on the economy with a larger market demand for products and services, and on the use of public services and infrastructure, like roads, water/sewage and health care.

4.1.2 Economy

Statistics on the share of employment by sector (ESPON RURALPLAN Report 2024 a) show that Albula is characterised by a large proportion working in the services, where more than half of the workforce are employed. In Malung-Sälen the largest share is in health etc., which typically includes several public services. The service industry is significant, and tourism is important here as well. Os is different from the two other pilot-cases as industry is the largest sector. Agriculture is also relatively large, compared to Malung-Sälen, but also to other municipalities in Innlandet.

Concerning income, all three countries where the pilot cases are located are high-income countries with household incomes above the average in the European Union. Maps 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7 show income per household for the pilot cases and the regions where they are located.

Map 4.5
Median household income in Graubünden, Switzerland



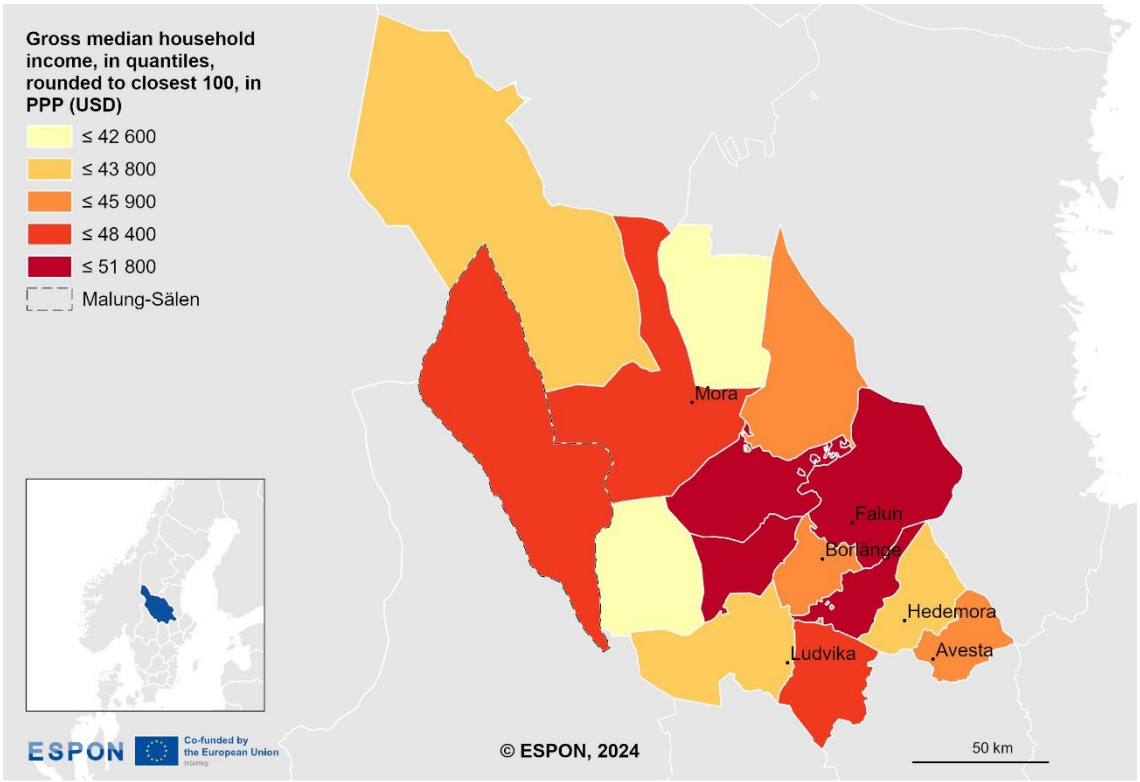
Territorial level: LAU (2021)
ESPON project: RURALPLAN
Origin of data: SwissTopo/Eidgenössische Steuerverwaltung/Eurostat (2024)
© EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Source: Swizz Topo/Eidgenössische Steuerverwaltung/Eurostat (2024)

The Albula region is among the municipalities in Graubünden with the lowest household income. Albula is surrounded by several municipalities with considerably

higher incomes, and which is easily accessible from Albula. Households in Switzerland, including Albula, have however on average higher income than the EU average, and higher than Norway and Sweden. On the other hand, the difference between the municipalities is larger in Graubünden than in Dalarna and Innlandet (see Maps 4.5 and 4.6).

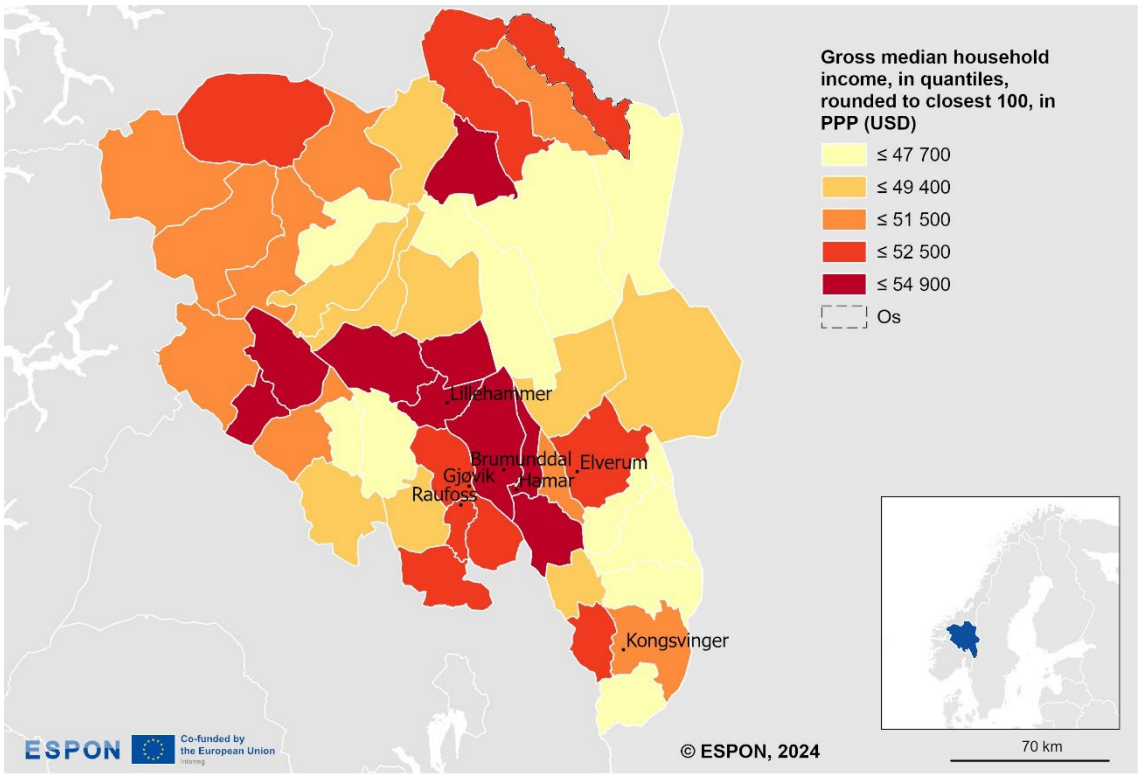
Map 4.6
Median household income in Dalarna, Sweden



Source: SCB/Eurostat (2024)

In Malung-Sälen, the household income is slightly above the average for Dalarna County. All municipalities in Dalarna, except for one, have a lower average income than the national level. However, the differences in income between the municipalities are small, and significantly less than those in Graubünden. On average, household income in Sweden is somewhat higher than in the EU, but considerably lower than in Switzerland and Norway (see Maps 4.5 and 4.7).

Map 4.7
Median household income in Innlandet, Norway



Source: Kartverket/SSB/Eurostat (2024)

In Os household income is among the highest in Innlandet. As in Dalarna, the differences in income between the municipalities in Innlandet are however relatively small, and much less than in Graubünden. Household income in Norway is significantly higher than EU average, but slightly lower than in Switzerland.

4.1.3 Geography

All three regions and pilot-cases in RURALPLAN are characterized with a low degree of urbanization and are thus considered rural. Mostly in Dalarna and Innlandet, where respectively 85 and 87% of the municipalities are rural. This is according to "degree of urbanization" used by Eurostat and defined by a combination of geographical contiguity and population density. Rural areas are also referred to as "thinly populated areas". In Graubünden 67% of the municipalities are rural, and a third is urban. Especially in Graubünden and Albula, but also in Innlandet, an increasing part of the population lives in shrinking municipalities (table 4.3). In Dalarna the situation is the opposite, with a strongly decreasing share who live in shrinking municipalities.

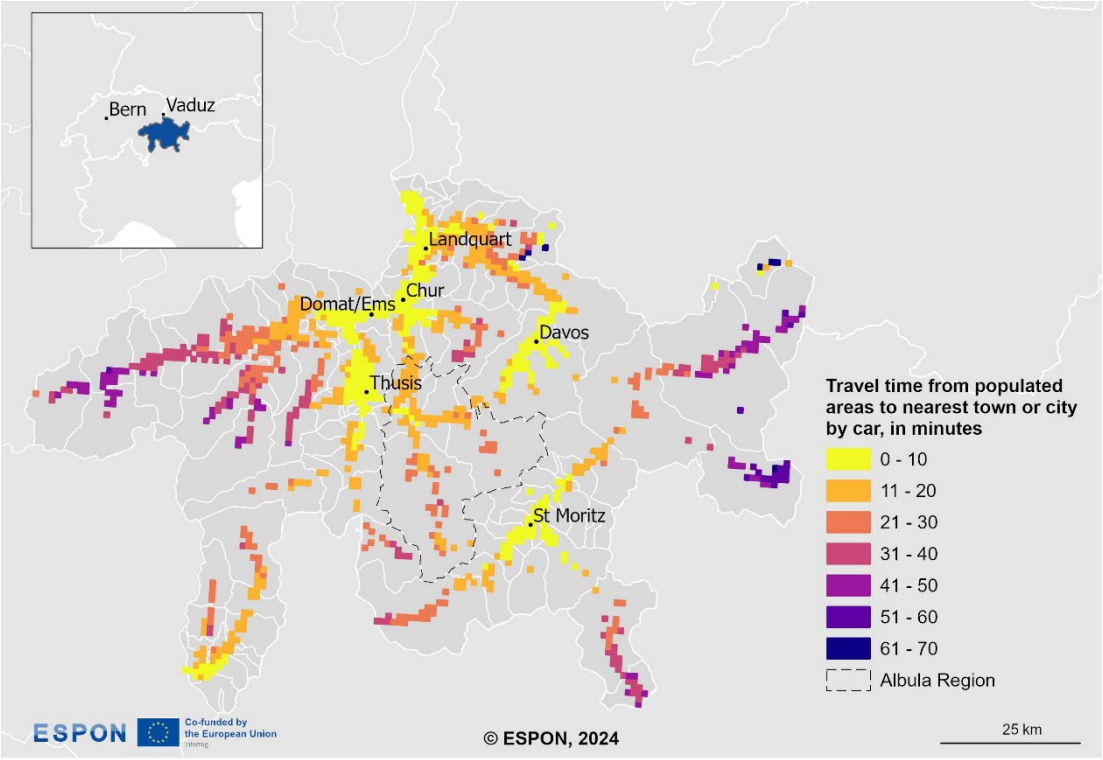
Table 4.3
Share of population in shrinking LAUs in percentage (based on LAU units for 2021)

Region	1961-2011, %	2011-2021, %
Innlandet, Norway	26	30
Dalarna, Sweden	42	11
Graubünden, Switzerland	14	34
Albula, Switzerland	20	59

Authors elaboration

Concerning accessibility, travel time by car to the nearest town with a minimum of 5000 inhabitants is calculated for our regions, including the pilot cases. Such towns represent both a labour market of a relatively significant size, and normally also agglomerations of a variety of services. Also, the travel time to the nearest train station is presented and considered a relevant indicator of accessibility for the population and for goods, both for inward and outward transport. The calculations also include towns and train stations outside of the regions, although they are not shown on the maps.

Map 4.8
Average travel time by car to nearest urban morphological zone, Graubünden, Switzerland



Territorial level: LAU (2021)
ESPON project: RURALPLAN
Origin of data: SwissTopo/OSM/Eurostat (2024)
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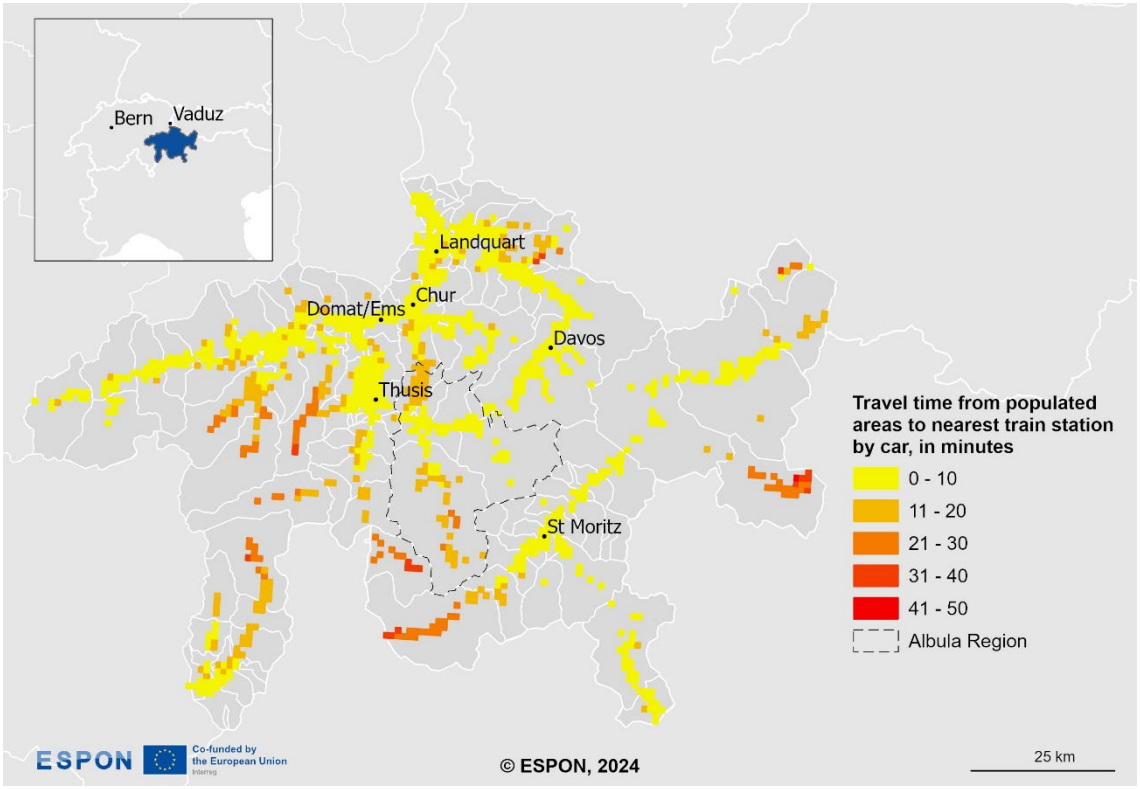
Source: Swiss Topo/OSM/Eurostat 2024

Map 4.9
Average travel time by car to nearest train station, Graubünden, Switzerland

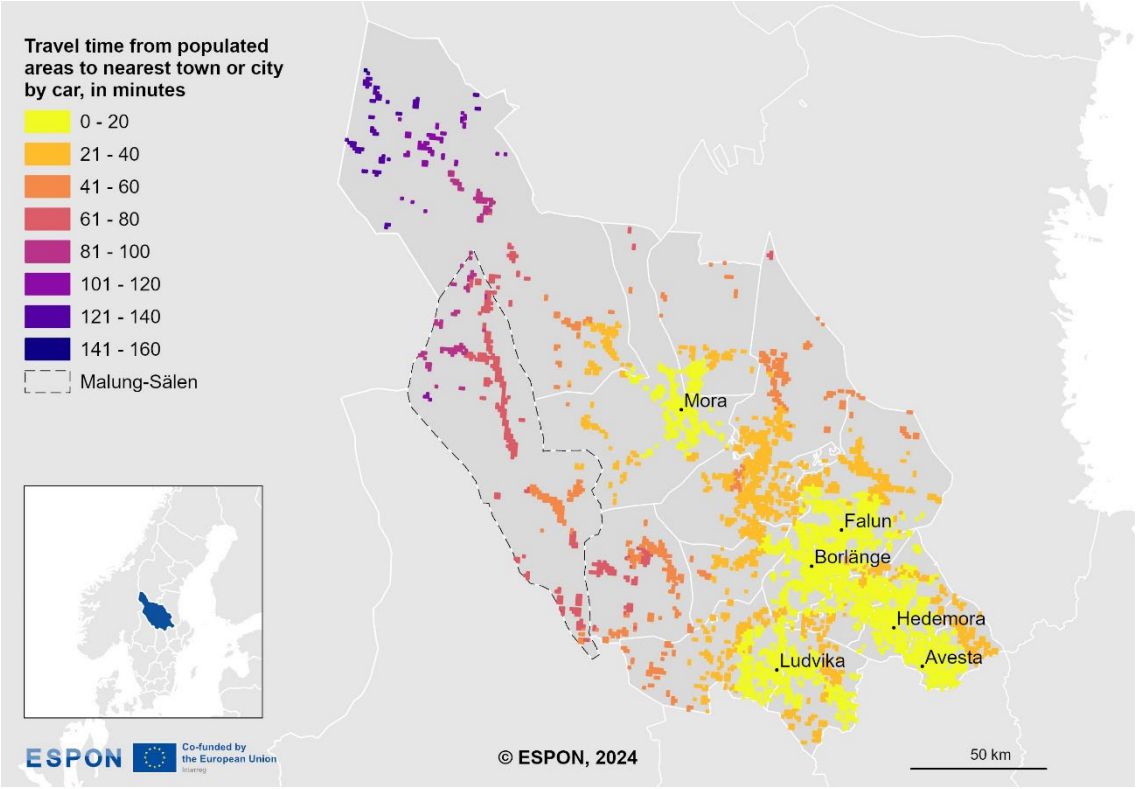


Territorial level: LAU (2021)
ESPON project: RURALPLAN
Origin of data: SwissTopo/OSM/Eurostat (2024)
© EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

Source: Swiss Topo/OSM/Eurostat (2024)

For Albula the maps above show the accessibility to the nearest town is in general good compared to many other rural areas in Graubünden, with less than 20 minutes travel time for a large part of the population. In the southern and eastern parts of Albula, travel times can be up to 30-40 minutes. Accessibility to a train station is very good in most of Graubünden, including Albula. Most people have 20 minutes or less to the nearest station.

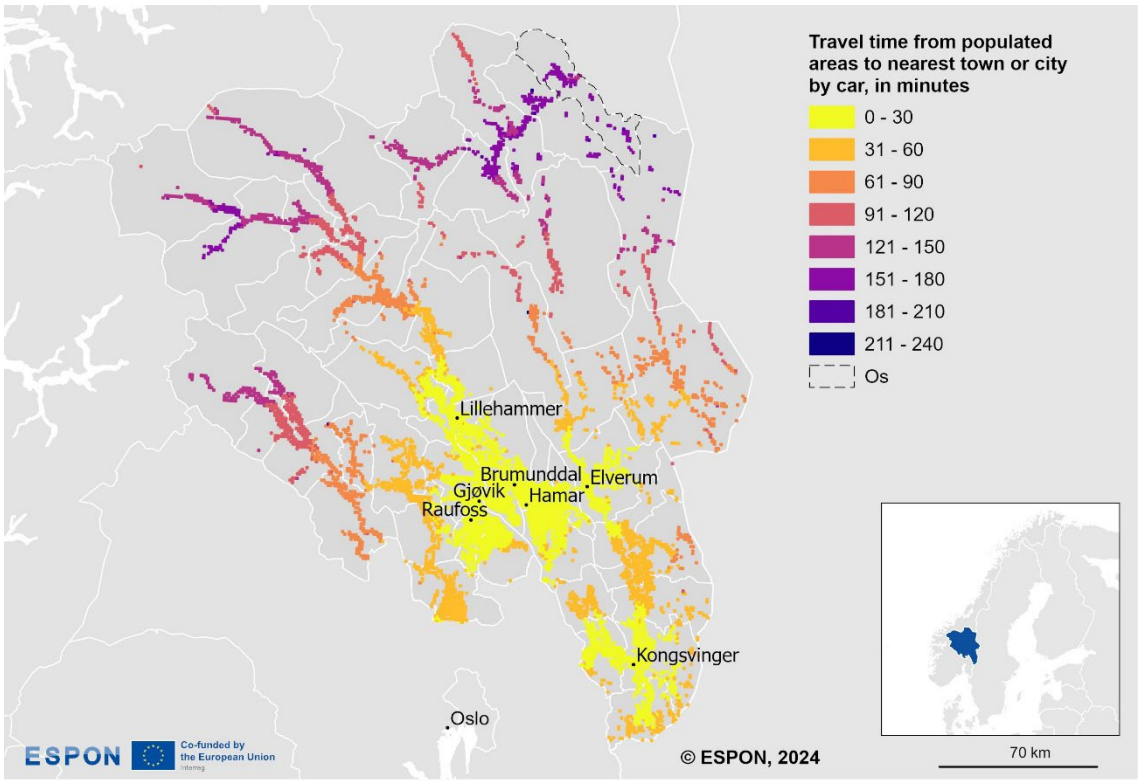
Map 4.10
Average travel time by car to nearest urban morphological zone, Dalarna, Sweden.



Source: Trafikverket (Lastkajen 6.0)/Eurostat (2024)

In Malung-Sälen the analysis shows that travel times to the nearest town are more than 40 minutes for the most central part of the municipality, while more than one hour for other parts of the municipality. Access to a train station is slightly better, but still more than 40 and 60 minutes for people in most of the municipality.

Map 4.11
Average travel time by car to nearest urban morphological zone, Innlandet, Norway



Source: Kartverket/OSM/Eurostat (2024)

In Os, travel times to the nearest town of more than 5000 inhabitants are well over 2 hours for people in the whole municipality. It is thus longer than most people would be willing to accept for a daily commute to work. The situation is the same in several of the northern parts of Innlandet, while people in the southern part of Innlandet have substantially shorter travel times. The nearest train station is significantly more accessible, with less than 20 minutes travel time for parts of the municipality, and between 21 and 40 minutes for the areas in the East. Os is among the municipalities in Innlandet with shortest travel times to a train station.

The accessibility to the nearest town varies considerably between the three pilot-cases, with much shorter travel times in Albula, Malung-Sälen is in a middle position, while the travel times for the population in Os is substantially longer. Regarding access to train stations, it is quite good in Albula and Os, while most people in Malung-Sälen must drive more than 40 and 60 minutes to the nearest station.

4.1.4 Types of shrinking in the three pilot cases

In what follows, the processes of shrinking in the three pilot-cases will be summarised and discussed in relation to a typology of a rural shrinking region in Europe. This typology was developed in the ESPON ESCAPE project, see table 4.4 (ESPON 2020a).

As the data in this chapter shows, Albula is characterised by a stable population development. The most significant demographic change is the projected decrease in population in working age, and the expected increase in elderly people. Economically the region has a large service sector and relatively low income compared to the average for Graubünden. Accessibility to urban centres and transport is good. According to the typology of shrinking from ESPON ESCAPE, Albula does not fit into one specific category, but possesses several common features found in categories 4 and 5.

Malung-Sälen, Sweden, has a severe shrinking of the population legacy, but the shrinkage has stopped in the last years. The economy is to a high degree within services (public and private). Household income is somewhat higher than in the EU, but quite low compared to the two other pilot-cases. Accessibility to urban centers is quite poor. Just like Albula, Malung-Sälen does not fit directly into one of the categories of shrinking. Due to the severe legacy of shrinking and high income it has similarities with category 2, while its servitized economy suggests several similarities with category 5.

Os, Norway, has a moderate legacy of shrinking, but current indicators suggest that in the future there will be active shrinking. Significant changes are expected in the demographic composition. Besides having a large public service sector, which characterize all Norwegian municipalities, the industrial sector occupies a dominant position, and agriculture is relatively important. Accessibility to urban centers is poor, but better to train stations. Os can be seen as a combination of category 2 and 3, as it is agro-industrial with moderate legacy shrinking (category 3), along with evidence of middle-incomes and active shrinking (category 2)

The three pilot-cases have of course several similarities since they are rural, shrinking, and/or significant demographic changes characterize them. When it comes to the legacy of shrinking, economy, and geography there are, however, significant differences. The pilot cases demonstrate similarities with most of the categories of complex shrinking, with the exception of category 1, as none of them is an agricultural low-income region. This is a strength for RURALPLAN as the RUPIL will be tested in different contexts and shrinkage situations

Table 4.4
Typologogy of complex shrinking and intermediate regions (5 classes)

Category	Label
1	Agricultural, very low-income regions with severe legacy and active shrinking
2	Industrial, mid-income regions with severe legacy and active shrinking
3	Agro-industrial, low-income regions with moderate, mostly legacy shrinking
4	Servitised, mid-low-income regions with moderate legacy shrinking
5	Industrial or servitised, mid-income regions with moderate, mostly legacy shrinking

Source: ESPON, 2020 a)

4.2 Responses to shrinking

The following review is organized according to the following themes: (a) Methods and strategies reported in academic journals, (b) Current policy responses to shrinkage, in general local /regional planning and in different sectors, and (c) discussions on the effectiveness and impact of current policy responses and planning practices. Finally, in (d), we summarize what we consider to be the most appropriate ways (recommendations) to address shrinkage. This general overview will also contribute to suggestions and recommendations on how to approach planning in the three pilot cases in Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway.

Methodologies, strategies and policies reported in papers

Several papers call for theoretical frameworks that help understand how to plan for shrinkage and manage population decline. Hence, to cope with population decline, there is a need for a clearer theoretical understanding and comprehensive debate on planning for shrinkage (Sousa & Pinho 2015).

The papers explore various approaches that planning and policy actors have used to address population decline. Efforts to reduce or counteract shrinkage are frequently observed responses in the literature. It is, as Hospers pinpoints, rather common to try to counteract shrinkage through growth-oriented planning strategies (Hospers 2013). Thus, Hospers provides a categorization of policy responses to shrinkage in which he distinguishes between efforts to reverse shrinkage on the one hand and policy actions based on acceptance on the other hand (Hospers 2013).

During the last decade, right-sizing and smart-shrinkage have been mentioned as possible responses to shrinkage challenges (Coppola 2019). However, some are critical of these concepts, stressing that rightsizing policies must be understood as part of a broader context of neoliberal urbanization (Aalbers & Bernt 2019).

More recent papers provide examples of how local agents cope with population shrinkage and how planning strategies are employed to cope with population decline in various contexts (Beunen, Meijer, & De Vries 2020). One example is regional design competitions used in attempts to plan for shrinkage (Kempenaar, van Lierop,

Westerink, Valk, & van den Brink 2016). Another example notes that some municipalities have an incoherent response to shrinkage, where it is accepted in some sectors/plans but ignored or counteracted in the master plan or other sectors (Hagen, Higdem & Overvåg 2022). Rather than providing single examples of methods, however, several authors stress the need for integrating various policy fields in planning for shrinkage (Camarda, Rotondo, & Selicato 2015) and for adjusting governance culture to achieve synergy between local actors (Leetmaa et al. 2015).

Many papers explore how civil society relates to shrinkage. One paper discusses forms of civic action and its relationship with urban shrinkage (Ročak, Hospers, & Reverda 2016). Another stresses the importance of utilization of social capital and informal planning practices in rural areas that are depopulating (Meijer & Syssner 2017). The discussions raised emphasize the importance of communication strategies employed by local governments in addressing demographic decline (Syssner & Siebert 2020).

Some papers discuss the interlinked challenges of depopulation and migration. One study is reported to have observed the evolution of local governance networks for hosting non-EU migrants in shrinking areas (Meijer, Popławska, & Szytniewski, 2023). In these spaces where migration was framed as a solution to decline, non-formal alternative governance networks were formed to host migrants.

Methodologies, strategies and policies reported in policies/projects

Demographic changes and shrinking in rural areas have ranked high on policy agendas over the last few years. In 2023, the EU launched a "Report on the impact of demographic change – in a changing environment" (European Commission 2023a) in which the European Commission advances the following solutions to these challenges (among others):

- Development of the Silver Economy, to both improve the quality of life for older rural people and create economic opportunities.
- Rural revitalization to address loss of attractiveness in such areas.
- A "talent booster mechanism" to address the lack of qualified workforce in some regions.

Regarding the third point, the EU has launched an initiative called "Smart adaptation of regions to demographic transition" which aims to help regions at risk of a talent development trap adapt their strategies and policies through reforms and investments. This issue is followed up in the most recent report from the EU Commission on the state of cohesion in the union (European Commission 2024). In this report a separate chapter is dedicated to the demographic transition. It is discussed how the population decline, and ageing is driven by natural decline and how already 40% of the population in the EU live in a shrinking region. This especially impacts rural regions, and where continued urbanisation is expected to accelerate shrinking and ageing in rural areas to an even greater extent. Policy challenges in terms of labour market shortages, fiscal sustainability, infrastructure provision, and access to

services, follow this development. Concerning the labour market, the report highlights how some regions are in a "talent development trap", which is a combination of a shrinking workforce and a small share of the population with tertiary education. Targeted policy responses are needed, such as the Harnessing Talent Initiative and the Talent Booster Mechanism.

A Horizon Europe project called RUSTIK ("Rural Sustainability Transitions through Integration of Knowledge for improved policy processes", project period 2022-2026), has as its theme transitions in rural areas, connected to socio-economic changes, climate change and environment and digitalisation. Living Labs in 14 European Pilot Regions across 10 European countries are central to the project. Regarding socio-economic changes, 8 of the 14 regions have shrinking and ageing as a main theme. Most of them seem to have implemented a traditional approach of trying to counteract and mitigate shrinking. North Karelia in Finland, however, emphasises that they will apply the concept of smart shrinking. This includes place-based solutions, economic balancing and renewal, creating development independent of population growth. They will develop new strategies, plans, and policies to develop sustainable livelihoods, emphasising residents' inclusion, well-being, and quality of life.

The focus of the Interreg-Europe project CASPER ("Citizen Activation in Shrinking rural areas for Place-based policies to Enhance Resilience" project period 2023-2027), is to involve citizens directly in finding solutions to depopulation challenges. Through local strategies, CASPER aims to boost community resilience, combining actions to mitigate and adapt to shrinking. The goal is to approach the "shrinking" issue holistically, mobilizing citizens and adopting a cross-sectoral, place-based perspective. 'Well-being' is defined as nurturing what they see as the most valuable resource: the people in the rural areas. They arrange workshops with a broad range of stakeholders and local people, in a way that is quite similar to RURALPLAN.

In 2023, the OECD launched a program called "Policies for depopulation and service delivery in rural regions" with a focus on preparing regions for demographic change. The focus of this program is on the delivery of services (health care, education, etc.) (OECD n.d.). Their approach is defined by three themes: (1) *Shrinking Smartly and Sustainably,* which is about adapting infrastructure, housing and services to depopulation and ageing whereby some needs decrease while others increase, (2) *Settlement Networks and Links between Population, Services and Connectivity,* and (3) *Understanding present and future public service delivery costs.* Several ongoing projects in rural areas in various European countries are part of this program. For example, in Galicia an action plan has been made on the following themes: quality service provision, digitalization, entrepreneurship and social innovation and multi-level governance. Also, the ESPON Prophecy project (ESPON 2022) is about access to services in the inner peripheries in Europe (which largely overlaps geographically with shrinking regions). The need for innovative and collaborative solutions for service provision, and to prioritize access to services of general interest is highlighted. There is a need to strengthening the ties between evidence and policy to find successful ways of dealing with service development processes, especially since there is no one-size fits all solutions. Administrative capacities need to be strengthened to be able to implement European policies that can be beneficial for the service provisions. And further

they also emphasize the need for moving to a focus on development understood as improvement of quality of life, and not in the sense of quantitative growth.

Through ESPON ESCAPE (ESPON 2020a), significant knowledge and experiences on shrinkage in rural areas has been developed. The project contributes to a deeper and broader understanding of shrinking. Further, it discusses how four socio-economic processes are causing shrinking: economic restructuring, locational disadvantage, peripherisation and disruptive events and political/systematic transitions. Based on thorough analysis of diverse statistics, they identify a typology of what they call "complex shrinking".

Case studies show that since full "repopulation" is often impractical, and abandonment is politically unacceptable, most policy approaches will be hybrids of mitigation and adaptation. Three mitigation strategies are identified: compensation (subsidies etc.), re-localisation (endogenous growth) and global reconnection (distance working, hyper mobility etc). This adaption strategy is called "Smart Shrinking", and where it is implemented, wellbeing of the residual population continues despite continued depopulation. Strategies for adapting services, as well as activities that exploit sparsity and extensification have been central in this approach. A baseline here is community acceptance and buy-in.

The Alpine Convention (2022) has as part of its work with "spatial planning for climate action" collected some good practices for growth and shrinking strategies. Their focus is on physical issues like land-use, infrastructure, and housing/settlements. They seek strategies that decouple economic growth from the use of resources to achieve carbon neutrality. This means that land take is decoupled from economic and population growth. In terms of growth, qualitative growth is prioritized over quantitative growth.

In two examples (one in Germany and one in Switzerland) the need and possibility of a retreat (eviction) of small and peripheral settlements "without sufficient development perspective" was discussed. Structural change should not be hindered by the preservation of outdated structures but must also involve "creative destruction". In other cases, there was more focus on how the existing infrastructure and housing could be adapted to shrinking, for example by using ageing as an opportunity to upgrade and adapt the housing stock.

EU has discussed challenges for small urban areas, and where a decreasing and ageing population is central (European Commission 2023b). The need for inter-municipal cooperation and multi-level governance is emphasized in the efforts to meet these challenges. In such cooperation the small municipalities need to be positioned as equal partners to larger centres, rather than as mere appendices to them. Otherwise, an asymmetry in power and representation might undermine the potential of such arrangements. Furthermore, there is a need for participatory approaches, among others the fostering of the collective intelligence of different local actors. The engagement must not however be limited to information and consultation procedures, but also include joint decision-making.

To focus on wellbeing and quality of life is a common thread in several of the policies and projects for shrinking rural areas discussed above. In the ESPON project QoL, it

is discussed how quality of life can be integrated in territorial development strategies (ESPON 2020c). Sparsely populated peripheral regions have low scores on quality-of-life indicators compared to other territories, especially in relation to socio-economic indicators and low provision of services. They however perform well on environmental factors and in subjective perceptions of life-quality, like interpersonal trust and self-esteem. It is recommended that it can be valuable to link the UN sustainability goals and quality of life in development strategies. A good balance between objective and subjective indicators for quality of life should be used, as the latter is needed to understand population's own assessments. It is further advised that citizens are involved in defining what quality of life means for them, and how this can be measured. This would improve the relevance of the indicators for both the authorities and the citizens.

Effects and impacts of current policy responses

There is little research that directly assesses or evaluates the effects of various policy and planning reactions to shrinkage. However, there are valuable experiences from several completed projects and some general insights can be derived from both research and policies/projects on a broader level.

A first important and initial step is to accept shrinkage and make it a central part of the process.

Acceptance should come with a focus on citizen engagement and a desire to enhance residents' quality of life (Hospers 2013). This doesn't mean hiding the challenges that come with population decline, such as the contradictions inherent in planning for shrinkage, negative connotations and stigma associated with "rural shrinking", and in some instances, the topic being such a taboo-subject that it is hardly possible to have a fact-based debate on shrinking processes (Sousa & Pinho 2015, ESPON 2020, Alpine Convention 2022). There are and will continue to be tensions between various responsibilities and challenges in shrinking municipalities (Grundel & Magnusson 2022). Economic strains caused by population decline and difficulties in providing infrastructure services to dispersed populations are important to consider (Grundel & Magnusson 2022). The focus needs to be on developing innovative and collaborative ways to plan and provide services within the context of demographic challenges (ESPON 2022, Hagen et al. 2022).

A second point is that although shrinking must be accepted, it needs to be disassociated from failure.

The inability to plan for depopulation can be seen as a policy failure, and the failure is here not about failure to grow, but failure to develop local adaption strategies (Syssner 2020c). Planning and strategies should instead be built around positive notions such as "transition", "restructuring", "qualitative growth", "renewal" etc. Further, "success" or development should be decoupled from demographic and economic growth. Policies need to have broader societal objectives like wellbeing, quality of life and inclusion, and the transition processes should be just and sustainable (ESPON 2022, 2020a, 2020c, Rustik n.d., CASPER 2024, Alpine Convention 2022). A part of this is to explore the potential opportunities connected with demographic change, for example the "silver economy"/facilitation of housing and infrastructure for older generations, "slow living", improved environmental sustainability, re-connecting with nature, etc. (ESPON 2020b, European Union 2023, Alpine Convention 2022).

A third point is the importance of citizen engagement in managing shrinkage effectively

In some papers, collaboration with local governments, residents and entrepreneurs is referred to as crucial (Kempenaar et al. 2016). Where positive outcomes have been observed, it is due to the importance of new alliances, as well as strategic timing in planning for shrinkage (Kempenaar et al. 2016). The collaborative aspect is touched upon in several papers, stressing the need to make use of social capital and informal planning practices to address population decline (Meijer & Syssner 2017). One paper refers to this in terms of adjusting governance culture to local forms of social capital in order to achieve synergy between local actors (Leetmaa et al. 2015). The role of non-governmental organizations and volunteers in addressing demographic decline is also explicitly discussed (Meijer, Popławska, & Szytniewski, 2023). The CASPER project (2024) aims to involve citizens directly in finding solutions to depopulation challenges. They view it as necessary to be able to put shrinking honestly on the agenda, and to get acceptance for required changes to services. Such participatory processes should include joint decision making, and not only information and consultation (European Commission 2023b).

A fourth point is to consider shrinkage planning as something that needs cross-sectoral and inter-municipal cooperation and well-functioning multi-level governance structures.

One paper suggests that different policy areas must work together to improve with dealing with urban shrinkage (Camarda et al., 2015). In the CASPER project (2024). Their approach is to address the shrinking issue holistically, by mobilizing citizens and adopting a cross-sectoral and place-based perspective. ESPON (2020a) claims

that the local and regional governance are the key levels, and that devolution of strategy-making and implementation capacity is crucial. This is due to the observation that "...there is no one-size-fits-all policy approach to solving the issue of rural shrinkage, since rural areas are so heterogeneous in terms of land structure, geographical position, socio-economic position and demographic profile." (p. 42). The strengthening of local capacity and that there is no one-size-fits-all policy is in a similar way emphasized by the ESPON Prophecy for the inner peripheries in Europe (ESPON 2022). Shrinking regions must be seen as equal partners towards larger centers in such collaborations (European Commission 2023b).

4.3 Planning status and future needs in the pilot cases

To be context specific the RURALPLAN project made an analysis and assessment of how current planning strategies and responses, and future planning needs and approaches, in the three pilot cases treat and relate to shrinking and demographic changes. Below is a compressed account of the analysis:

Albula, Switzerland

For Albula, the most recent project on strategic planning that the region is involved in, is the revision of the "regional location development strategy (Standortentwicklungsstrategie)", last updated in 2019. This is an initiative that amends "regional, spatial concept" with institutional, organizational, or financial issues and builds on the results of all the previous strategies The regional authorities wanted to ensure RURALPLAN was coupled with the "regional location development strategy", which meant taking up defined measures and achieved results of preceding strategic activities as a common ground and then, as a new element, searching for synergies and potentials between the Albula region and the surrounding regional centers in terms of services of general interest. Demographic changes, and shrinking, are given much attention in plans in Albula. The main approach and objectives are on a "good life" for all people and ages, and on sustainability. However, the plans also to some degree, focus on countering shrinkage by at least keeping the population numbers stable, and adapting housing for the coming demographic changes (thus, a type of hybrid approach to shrinking). Albula needs to examine several existing sectoral strategies for shrinking simultaneously and holistically and see how they can be implemented in practice with a focus on the relationships between Albula and surrounding regional centers in the RUPIL process.

Malung-Sälen, Sweden

Thus far, the municipal plans of Malung-Sälen are not directly addressing the demographic changes in their overall planning, as the municipality has growth ambitions. However, there are demographic challenges concerning adaptive strategies related to the labor market and necessary changes in the municipal budget toward an increased financing of elderly care. Importantly, the municipality focuses on the future

quality of life, and good environments for people and businesses as well as the natural environment itself. We are of the view that Malung-Sälen could profit from using the RUPIL process to increase understanding of the demographic challenges in society and amongst vital societal actors, as well as using the RUPIL-process to mobilize resources and co-create concrete suggestions as solutions and strategic elements related to their future vision.

Os, Norway

In Os municipality, shrinking and demographic changes were seen as a very real and central challenge. The main overall strategy has so far mostly been to counteract shrinking. However, at the local level, the response is hybrid, as plans for services like schools and elderly care have a more adaptive approach. However, Os has needed to have a more realistic and adaptive approach in their holistic Master plan and plans connected with economic development. It appears that this has been the goal for their current process in developing a new societal plan, and we acknowledged that RUPIL could support their efforts in this direction.

In short, the analysis showed how current planning in the three pilot cases was directed at countering shrinking, which is the most common response to shrinking in Europe. All were however interested in changing their approach in future planning, with more weight on adaption to shrinking and focusing on a "good life" for the existing population. At the same time, there is a number of differences between the cases in issues considered important to planning. This is due to their different contexts they face and their shrinking-situations. For example, the importance of binding people from different villages more socially together in Os, the development of the labor market in Malung-Sälen, and cooperation between regional centers in Albula. This analysis has provided a good foundation for testing the RUPIL model in different planning contexts, and thus increased the transferability of the model to other shrinking rural areas in Europe.

5 The final results from the RUPIL testing

The Rural Planning and Innovation Lab' is designed to support local or regional master/strategic planning to create innovative responses for development in rural areas facing demographic challenges and /or shrinking.

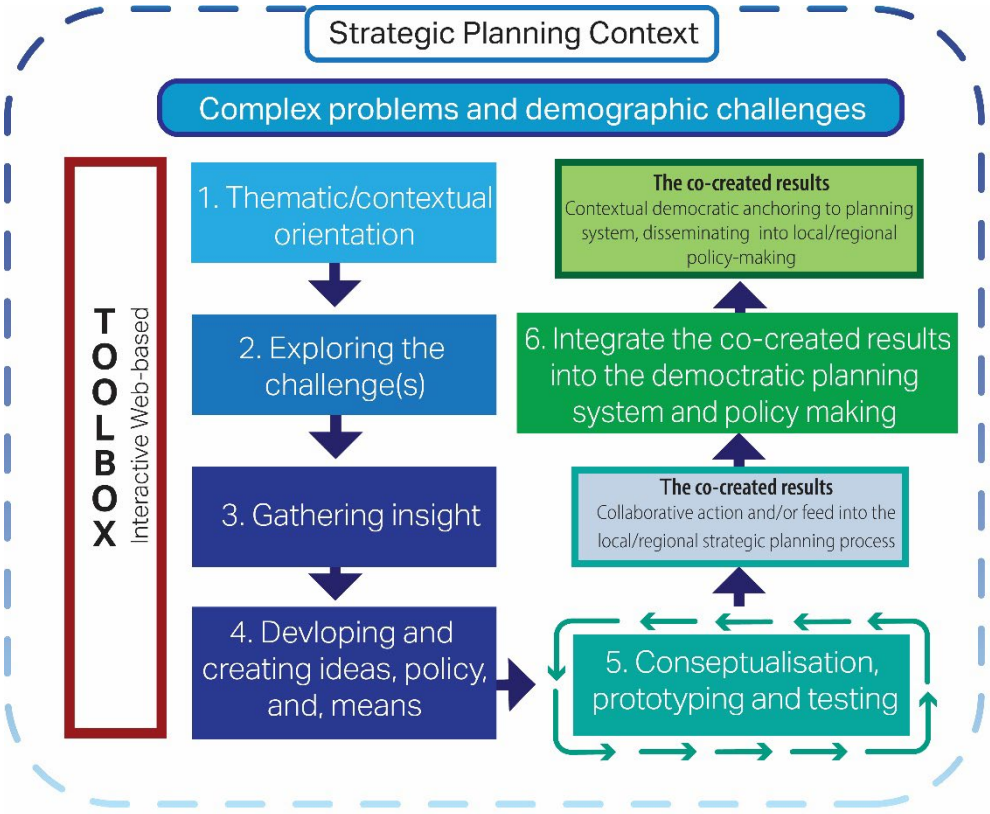
Overall, the testing of RUPIL has been successful and substantial results for each case provide innovative, yet realistic input to inform planning activities in each pilot case. Also, the analysis resulted in an updated and revised model. An interactive Toolbox for RUPIL has been developed, which in addition to insight into the facilitation process, lowers the threshold for adopting the model. Accounts of the testing, the evaluation, and our assessment and analysis, see the report on Testing the Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, (ESPON RURALPLAN 2024 b).

5.1 The RUPIL-model- design after testing- and toolbox

Throughout the RURALPLAN project, we have accumulated insights into the efficacy of the RUPIL model and identified areas requiring adjustments, enhancements, and modifications, keeping in mind the model's goals and transdisciplinary approach. Importantly, any improvements to the model should be feasible within the three-day framework, with the possibility that it can be extended related to the planning task at hand.

We have chosen to present the revised RUPIL model in two ways, although similarly adjusted and adapted as a result of the pilot testing. The first (Figure 5.1) is the revised RUPIL as a comparative illustration of the original analytical model (Figure 2.1), tested in this project. The revised analytical version of RUPIL illustrates the improved model and phases including the accompanying Toolbox. The two strands from phase 5 in the original analytical model presented in Figure 2.1 are removed since the left-hand side of implementation and scaling and dissemination concerned the testing and analysis of the model itself. This strand is finalized by this final report. All phases are further described in the text below.

Figure 5.1
The revised analytical RUPIL-model for a strategic planning context



Source: Eide, Wedum, Higdem, Tholstrup, Overvåg and Bern 2023

The second (Figure 5.2) is the revised RUPIL model which is designed with educational goals in mind and to be used in planning practices. This new version is suited for sharing, and illustrates better:

a) the territorial and strategic planning context

b) the visualization of the iterative process

c) split one phase of the tested model into two manageable parts, and

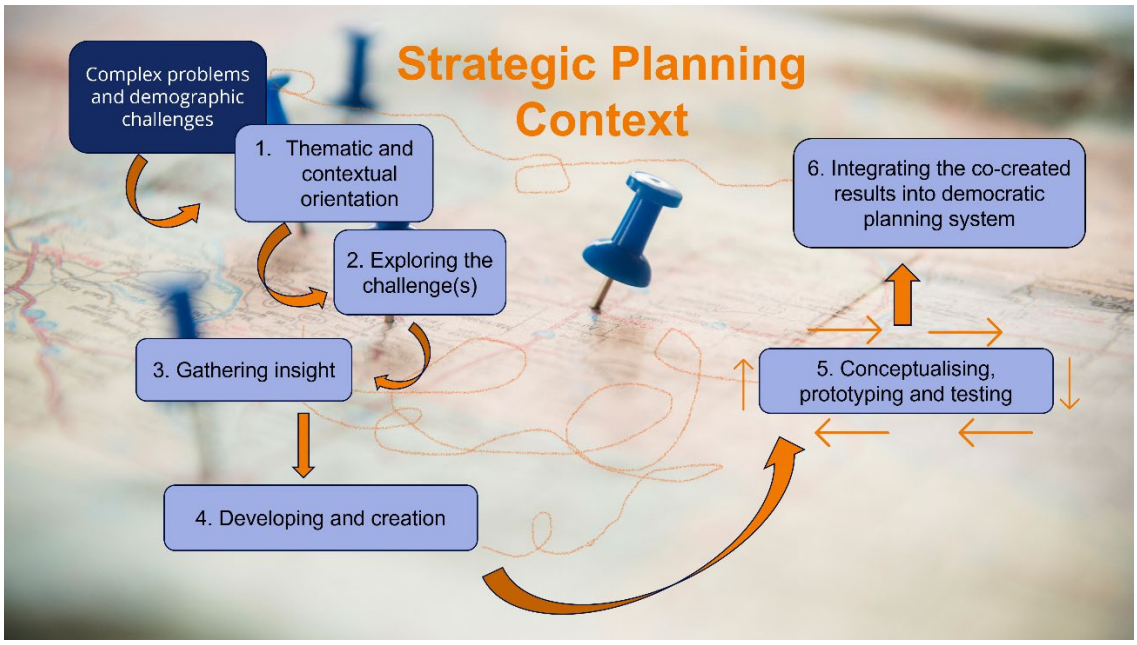
d) the accompanying Toolbox as an integrated part of the model, easily accessible in the web version by clicking on the boxes in the illustration and describing each phase.

We will consider more specifically into each phase of (the revised) RUPIL as illustrated in Figure 5.2, and its 6 phases. These phases are:

1. Thematic and contextual orientation
2. Exploring the challenge(s)
3. Gathering insight
4. Developing and creation

5. Conceptualisingg, prototyping, and testing
6. Integrating the co-created results into a democratic planning system

Figure 5.2
The revised pedagogical RUPIL-model for a strategic planning context



©RUPIL, INN 2024. Based on Eide and Wedum et al, 2023

In general, facilitating a RUPIL- method should pay attention to ensure facilitating processes based upon conscious choices about pace and progression, along with an alternation between opening and closing techniques to discover, define, develop and deliver solutions to wicked or complex problems concerning demographic change. The process is iterative allowing for several rounds of creativity, development, and circling back when necessary. This ensures solutions are tailored and adjusted to the real challenges of the cases in different societies. The Toolbox guides the facilitator about how to arrange and facilitate each phase and provides relevant tools and methods to reach the planned results of each innovation phase.

Phase 1, Thematic and Contextual Orientation.

Phase 1 is about presenting the case municipality/region, current planning processes, and the framework for the processes that are to follow. Participants should gain an overview of their municipality/region's situation, recognizing that their circumstances are not unique, but rather inform part of a broader European trend towards aging and depopulation. During the initial phase to create a knowledge-based and realistic approach, it is crucial to establish a shared understanding of a realistic planning approach grounded in the factual context of the case municipality/region.

The demographic changes must not be trivialized but taken seriously and integrated into all relevant parts of the planning process, and it must be discussed how the community will deal with these changes. Facilitators must be prepared to understand all aspects of the process and allocate enough time in the process for the participants to take on board such a paradigm shift in the development of their thinking.

Phase 2, Exploring the Challenge(s)

Phase 2 is about exploring the problem: What does it involve? For whom is this a problem? What do we know about the consequences of this problem? We will explore the problem so that we will in due course arrive at a unified understanding of the challenges with which we are dealing.

Phase 3, Gathering Insight

This phase focuses on establishing a comprehensive understanding of a problem and identifying previously unrecognized connections. It is therefore essential to engage with a diverse array of citizens, business actors, volunteers, politicians, and other stakeholders who contribute varied perspectives and insights, and to participate in and contribute to the resolution of these issues. We recognize the necessity of having enough time for the invitation process for workshop participants, and in so doing, ensuring the assembly of a broad and representative panel. This contributes to engaging social actors in planning and creates new roles for participating politicians.

Phase 4, Developing and Creating

Phase 4 focuses on development and creation. Idea development is central to innovation work. Creativity is conceiving, creating, and being able to describe a new idea (Lerdahl 2007). This phase opens for the possibility of ideas that can offer solutions to dealing with the problem or challenge. Phase 4 relies on raising many new ideas for consideration. Those involved in the process must be open and build on the input of others.

Phase 5, Conceptualising, Prototyping and Testing

Phase 5 encompasses conceptualization, prototyping, and testing. Central to this phase is making a description of our solution (conceptualization), before we create a prototype of the concept for feedback and validation. The last step and most important step is to test whether the prototype will work as intended. It is through testing that improvements and further development of the concept can be made.

It is crucial to elucidate the iterative process involved in phase 5. The prototypes should undergo multiple rounds of testing and refinement before they can be incorporated into the political planning process of phase 6.

If RUPIL is to be part of a comprehensive planning process, all ideas should be recorded, as a point of reference to enhance further development. When such a process is framed within the RUPIL process, it makes it possible for more ideas to be fully developed (as prototypes) before commencing with phase 6**.**

Phase 6, Integrating the co-created results into a democratic planning system

When the RUPIL model and process are framed within a strategic planning context, the result is its integration into a democratic and political planning proposal that is relevant to most contexts. RUPIL may be applied as the main approach to seek and develop innovative strategies and solutions in the planning process, or alternatively it can be a vital part of the process itself. The actual planning authority, either on the local, sub-regional, or regional level must ensure the legitimacy of the process before starting with RUPIL. The planning authority should also decide how the results of RUPIL can be integrated into the ordinary governmental procedure of the planning activity, providing democratic legitimacy; as well as ensuring legal and formal confirmation on collaborative activities and the government's commitment to collaborating with governmental bodies on different levels, interests, and as actors who are part of an action program. This we call the governance of planning.

5.2 Possibilities and challenges of RUPIL

The model aspires to function as a democratic participatory instrument, supporting local authorities in their strategic master planning endeavors. The objective is to facilitate planning based on more realistic assumptions about how regions are shrinking and on the population's interests, preferences, needs and wishes for what constitutes a 'good life' in the context of their local community. The result will be ideas for innovative strategies, strategic elements, and measures developed as co-created and visually represented solutions. In RUPIL, we have expanded on basic methods with a transdisciplinary approach, and in line with the framework of innovative planning that places a greater emphasis upon the following: a) *engaging societal actors in planning to mobilize more resources for development, b) creating a knowledge-based and realistic approach, c) developing new roles for politicians, d) developing processes to legitimize other social objectives, and e) developing innovative processes in the search for alternative goals, strategies, and solutions.*

We will now discuss possibilities and challenges related to the RUPIL model, a reflection of the experiences from the pilot testing, and an analysis and assessment of the evaluation divided into five main categories which reflect the main goals of the project, as well as the goals of RUPIL as addressed above.

The categories presented on the following pages are:

1. Engaging societal actors in planning to mobilize more resources for development and to develop new roles for politicians,
2. Having a knowledge-based and realistic approach, and adjustability to context,

3. Democratic anchoring and implementation to legitimize other social objectives,
4. Innovative strategies and actions to develop innovative processes in the search for alternative goals, strategies, and solutions, and
5. Upscaling and diffusion.

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF RUPIL

1. Engaging societal actors in planning to mobilize more resources for development and to develop new roles for politicians

The results of the pilot case testing illustrate the importance of the initial phases before entering the actual workshops of RUPIL. The planning authority at the local or regional levels should undertake a thorough assessment of how to promote and invite a broad set of interests from the local or regional society to engage in the RUPIL process.
As research and experience indicate, the broader the set of actors bearing different interests, perspectives, knowledge, resources, and so on that participate, the more likely different, new, and innovative strategies, solutions, or measures will be created. Such a broad set of participants should also encompass all generations in society. This may be a challenging task for lean public administrations, and an issue traditionally discussed in the planning literature, as well as in planning practice.
Referring to the test results, engaging local and/or regional politicians in RUPIL contributes to the diversity and engagement of the actors in the process. It increases the scope of resources involved, increases process legitimacy, and importantly: the results suggest it is vital for policy and decision-makers to understand the actual situation and make the leap to change their mindset to development without population growth and overcome the stigma of shrinking (demographic change).
Such involvement results in politicians developing new roles as equal participants in an innovative planning process and may act as boundary spanners between sectors and interests as we have experienced in the testing. In addition, as the quotes illustrate, the process has created a better relationship between the administration and politicians which contributes to mutual trust in finding paths and solutions for the future.

An overwhelming majority of participants in the pilot processes responded positively to how the work was done, co-learning and co-creation were highly valued, and especially the diverse composition of actors working together. We should keep in mind the challenges of diversity in such rural areas.

Although a broad set of interests is included in the process, the number of actors participating tends not to mirror such variety. This is because the number of tasks in civil society is divided by relatively few citizens. This implies that one person may be the holder of several roles, for example as a politician, leader of the Sports Team, and member of a business association. The results suggest that more resources were mobilized to realize new strategies and actions. These could be resources such as knowledge, land and land-use, buildings, capital, infrastructure of various kinds, working hours, networks, and decision-making arenas. Such resources may come from private, public, or voluntary areas.
As RUPIL provides a participatory, democratic, and bottom-up arena, the quality of the outcome requires an effort from the planning authority to inspire participation and provide easily accessible and functional arenas that include all citizens.

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF RUPIL

2. Having a knowledge-based and realistic approach, and adjustability to context

In the RUPIL process, it is vital to provide and present a broad overview of the municipality/region's situation, recognizing that circumstances are not unique, but rather constitute part of a broader European trend of aging and depopulation. During these initial phases, to create a knowledge-based and realistic approach, we learned that the RUPIL process largely established a shared understanding of a realistic planning approach grounded in the factual data and prognosis delineating the context of the case municipality/region. To be knowledge-based in planning activities requires easy access to readable and understandable data, which is context-dependent and may vary between countries as well as regions.
The three pilots tested were situated in three countries with different institutional settings and planning authorities and systems. This provides contextual variety. The Swedish and Swiss pilots implemented RUPIL in a modified version over two long days, while the Norwegian case was carried out in the original version.

The evaluation does not indicate any differences in the level of satisfaction with the participatory and innovative process of RUPIL. The evaluation and our assessment suggest the RUPIL model provides the opportunity for close collaboration, participatory activity, as well as concrete, and realistic discussions on possible future solutions within prioritized themes. How to design the process (including the composition of actors) is context-dependent and should be considered in close collaboration with the planning units and authorities.

> It has contributed positively to the climate of cooperation in the municipal council – something happens when you build Lego[2] together! The workshops have also contributed to strengthening the relationship between politicians and the administration. It has been an effect that the municipality had not thought of, but which we can now clearly see."
>
> **Municipal leadership in Os, Norway**

[2] In phase 5 of the RUPIL Lego can be used for building prototypes.

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF RUPIL

3. Democratic anchoring and implementation to legitimize other social objectives

As an innovative, democratic planning approach, the RUPIL process must be anchored and legitimized by the local or regional planning authority. The RUPIL model and process are framed within a strategic planning context, and the result is its integration into a democratic and political planning proposal; something that is relevant to most contexts.
RUPIL may be applied as a main approach to seek and develop innovative strategies and solutions in the planning process, or as a vital part of the process itself.
The actual planning authority, either on the local, sub-regional, or regional level must ensure the legitimacy of the process before starting with RUPIL. The planning authority should also decide how the results of RUPIL are to be integrated into the ordinary governmental procedure of the planning activity, providing democratic legitimacy; as well as ensuring legal and formal confirmation on collaborative activities and the government's commitment to collaborating with governmental bodies on different levels, interests, and with actors by an action program. This we call the governance of planning. Hence, planning becomes a political tool for innovation in politics and policies that legitimize new or other social objectives of public value. The local or regional authorities are the makers of the framework for collaborative policy formation. Therefore, the politicians in the collaboration play a vital role as makers or approvers of the framework for RUPIL.
The forms of democracy in which innovative planning exists include new forms of governance that have developed from the perspectives of participatory co-production and the co-creation of planning. This implies that a broad set of societal actors engaged in and contributing to innovative planning, as referred to in section 1 above, contributes to local society's awareness of the actual challenges, envisioning innovative strategies and actions, and the legitimacy of the realistic approach. Civil society's engagement also contributes to the implementation of actions.
We have seen how RUPIL can be used as a vehicle to achieve collective and coordinated action. Also, the strategic planning context is differentiated throughout Europe. This implies attention to a multi-level perspective, how planning authorities (territorial or sectorial) are organized, and how to include relevant actors in the RUPIL process.
.

It was good with the workshops, they offered opportunities to meet different types of actors that we do not meet on a daily basis, for new meetings and dialogues".

Municipal leadership in Malung-Sälen, Sweden

Stakeholders from regional administrations, agriculture, commuters, second homes and health institutions were involved. Very good group dynamics!"

Leadership in Albula, Switzerland

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF RUPIL

4. Innovative strategies and actions to develop innovative processes in the search for alternative goals, strategies, and solutions.

The test results suggest that RUPIL is a vehicle for the development of innovative strategies and policy measures in a facilitated Innovation lab with a diverse set of actors. As we underlined in Chapter 2, what is innovative is what breaks with established practices or seeks to identify new social objectives. This means that innovation is context-dependent, meaning that "borrowing" or getting inspired by ideas for subsequently adapting them to other and new contexts, is innovation. This is why concepts such as financing affordable housing as a collective solution, taxation forms such as 'Bed Money' in the tourism sector, or 'the Collaborating municipality' will be innovative in some contexts, but maybe not in others.

It is interesting to note that common strategies for planning and future strategic work appear to deal with relevant challenges posed by demographic issues, regardless of context. However, these common pathways have context-related ideas attached, and it is often then that we find innovative initiatives and ideas. See also the Case report (ESPON RURALPLAN 2024b).

Overall, the strategies derived from each pilot case are divided into three main categories:

a) Strategies related to the concepts of living good lives,
b) strategies seeking to deal with demographic change, including shifts in resource allocation for public services and investments, and
c) strategies that aim to counteract current developments.

Some strategies may be associated with more than one category above. Only one of the three cases sees shrinking or demographic change as an opportunity, through the idea of drawing on the pensioners as a resource for the local communities. The specific strategies in the three cases are described and explained in the Case report (ESPON RURALPLAN 2024b).

Based on the pilot testing study, we suggest vital areas upon which local and regional policymakers should consider focusing, to enhance rural areas facing demographic challenges to become as inclusive, and resilient, providing opportunities for quality of life as satisfactorily as possible. Seen together they point to a direction where strategies to deal with shrinking rural areas should put an emphasis upon and direct attention towards the following themes and issues:

- The young local inhabitants, especially between approximately 15 years old (upper secondary school) and the beginning of their 30s (the establishment phase). For them key issues include motivation, information, and matching local job opportunities with young people. It is also important to meet the needs of local businesses, services and governments for labour (see the point on the local labour market below). The need for new, diverse, and affordable housing with inclusive social meeting places is central. Examples of innovative solutions from the cases include "Kennenlernentage" (get-to-know-days) and initiatives to bring together potential" employees and employers through digital platforms or summer camps for young people. In these ways, youth meet businesses and the public sector's potential workplaces. Also, a regional Youth council may contribute to advancing strategies in this area.
- The elderly local inhabitants, from the age of retirement. This focus includes adapted and social housing in inclusive housing areas, social meeting places and housing

between generations, prevention of health problems, and drawing upon pensioners as resources in local services, cultural and social life. These measures can in many cases be advantageously combined. Examples of innovative solutions from the cases include initiatives such as "Senior Power", pensioner companies, and pensioners as "House Hosts" in kindergartens or nursing homes. Another example is to create a variety of housing from micro to macro sizes in residential courtyards, to include all types of citizenship, and to create social arenas.

- The local labor market. Strengthening the local labor market is crucial for enabling businesses and governments to fulfil their tasks and to enhance further development. Such a focus includes information and the motivation of youth (see also above), meeting places/fairs, and the establishment of regional services, to provide a wider offer to inhabitants and employees. Examples of innovative solutions from the cases include new forms of regional market days, the establishment of an Interregional Health Centre, business areas and hubs, co-location in local centres and new arenas for inhabitants' businesses and cultural activities.
- Cooperation, new roles and tasks. Most measures do require and are best solved, through cooperation between several actors. This may require actors to take on new roles and tasks and to share responsibility in new ways. Included are municipalities or regions seeking to share the implementation of social services, finance, and plan housing in new ways, and pensioners taking responsibility for services, and social and cultural services. We have already provided some examples of innovative solutions from the case studies above. However, we will underline the overall strategy for the municipality in one case, called "The Cooperative Municipality", where the municipality finds and establishes collaborative arenas for the development and execution of collective solutions in new ways. Digital platforms to promoting regional initiatives and cooperation among citizens. The strategy of creating new (forms of) meeting places and cultural development involves co-operation between different cultural associations, where the goal is "the lively valley". It includes the establishment of a volunteer network and de-nominating a coordinator key role for the overview and coordination of volunteers, teams, and organizations.
- Breaking with "frozen" frameworks. Several measures do require solutions that do not fit into existing frameworks and traditions. This includes living arrangements that do not fit into existing planning regulations and rural traditions, the importing of ideas from other places, and new ways of financing services and infrastructure. Examples of innovative solutions from the case studies include "Bed Money" as an alternative to tourist tax, which is an innovative way of co-financing projects. In this case, the funds are allocated to finance public railways, new forms of financing affordable housing (collective solutions), and new ways of planning areas for micro-to macro housing, where financing is undertaken through a collaboration between public and private parties.

In this Chapter 5 we have presented a revised and improved version of the Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, RUPIL, which is a model for knowledge-based strategic and innovative planning and policymaking based upon a realistic planning perspective. We have also concluded that RUPIL is an appropriate model for upscaling because it is adjustable to different contexts and applicable to areas experiencing different demographic challenges.

RUPIL contributes towards a shift in the planning perspective from the traditional growth paradigm towards more realistic expectations, where development is understood more broadly than population growth. However, this may be a challenging conceptual shift, and hence we offer some reflections worth considering when recommending a diffusion based on open access to RUPIL.

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF RUPIL

5. Upscaling and diffusion

The RUPIL model and the accompanying Toolbox aim to be self-instructive and useful for rural planning authorities who are experiencing demographic challenges. Even though self-instructive material for applying RUPIL in a strategic planning process is available and ready for use, facilitator skills should not be downplayed. One solution to this obstacle for many small entities is for us to develop and provide a net-based seminar and instructional videos, which will provide new facilitators with the necessary basic skills.

However, we know that small rural municipalities and sub-regional cooperation entities, often have a very lean administration, characterised by weak planning competence, capacities, or both. We therefore recommend establishing a 'Planning Practical Taskforce' of skilled and trained facilitators who can contribute to the challenging planning task, using the RUPIL model in areas experiencing demographic challenges. Such a team should add to an established institutional arrangement at the national or regional levels according to context.

Norway

In the Norwegian context, there are several similar suggestions of 'taskforces' that might practically assist local and rural areas in planning and dealing with issues of national and local interest. For example, "The White Paper on Nature" (Meld. St. 35 2023-24), suggests developing "regional and practical task forces" to help local planning authorities, the team situated on the county municipality level. A similar measure is also advocated by researchers when suggesting a hands-on task force to assist local and rural municipalities in the challenging task of planning for leisure homes when there is increased pressure on the areas from real estate development companies, accompanied with high demand (Eriksson et.al, 2024), or discussions on local municipal planning in the face of national pressure for more wind power mills (Vasstrøm et.al, 2024).

There is wide recognition of the need to strengthen the competence, skills, and capacity in complex planning issues in rural and small administrations. We consider it is timely to suggest establishing 'Competence teams' that encompass a wide range of knowledge and skills, needed in assisting small places in their planning tasks, including RUPIL. Not the least to enhance innovative and realistic planning within future oriented perspective that is sustainable and resilient. We believe these teams should be located at the county municipality level of Norway since this level is responsible for cooperation and planning guidance vis a vis the municipalities, as well as being the regional planning authority and a key actor in regional development matters.

Furthermore, the University of Inland Norway is part of the Forum for Planning Education in Norway, which undertakes targeted initiatives to strengthen the municipal sector's ability to work strategically, knowledgeably, and with a long-term perspective on development and planning. In such a context RUPIL could become an important tool and resource,

To disseminate RUPIL widely in Norway, there should be established a connection with the Norwegian District Centre which has amongst other things, developed an "Easy planning"

portal, suited for small and rural planning authorities to find inspiration, tips, and advice. In addition, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development would be good cooperative partners to enhance disseminating RUPIL.

Sweden

In a Swedish context, the administrative and strategic capacity of small and depopulating municipalities has been highlighted in several contexts. Several government inquiries have examined the capacities of Swedish municipalities – especially the small, sparsely populated and depopulating ones. The inquiries have highlighted the municipalities' financial ability to fulfil their missions, forms of collaboration, and approaches to fostering innovation.

Several government agencies — including the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket), the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket), and Vinnova, Sweden's Innovation Agency — engage with Swedish municipalities by providing knowledge support and promoting innovation and development in the fields of spatial planning, welfare, and local and regional development.

The municipalities' membership organization, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), continuously provides knowledge support to its members. The organization SmåKom – The Swedish Association of Small Municipalities – focuses on supporting development initiatives in smaller municipalities. Additionally, several voluntary inter-municipal collaboration bodies have been established across the country to pool resources, enhance innovation capacity, raise skill levels, and enable specialization among participating municipalities.

Furthermore, several university institutions, such as the School of Public Administration at the University of Gothenburg, the Centre for Local Government Studies at Linköping University, and the Division of Urban and Rural Development at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), undertake targeted efforts to strengthen the municipal sector's ability to work strategically, knowledgeably, and with a long-term perspective on development and planning. In all these contexts, RUPIL is well-positioned to become an important tool and resource—flexible, self-instructive, and focused on solving real problems, particularly in small, shrinking, and resource-constrained municipalities.

Switzerland

The theme and conclusions of this project overlap with other issues that have occupied Switzerland in the past and will occupy us in the future. In Switzerland, participatory planning processes have been well established for several years. However, an innovative, co-designed and participatory tool, such as the RUPIL with its own accompanying methodology provides something new. It is therefore important to widely share the lessons in the planning community.

First, the methodology of the RUPIL model must be available in a concise, succinct, and easy-to-read format that targets municipal and regional levels. With this in mind it should therefore be translated into at least German, French and Italian.

This product must be disseminated by the relevant federal offices, such as the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (Seco), the Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE), and associations such as the Swiss Centre for Mountain regions (SAB), as well as the Swiss Association of Municipalities, (SGV). Secondly, an advisory brief could be created to detail how a municipality might utilise the RUPIL process. Then the further implementation steps shall be clarified.

6 Consolidated conclusions and recommendations

The Targeted Analysis RURALPLAN has answered vital questions on how rural and regional planning authorities in Europe deal with rural shrinking and how it overlays economic and demographic trends. The literature review of RURALPLAN shows that in most of rural Europe, there has been a lack of attention among planners and politicians to face the consequences of shrinkage. In the literature, there is broad agreement that growth-oriented planning, which all too often pays scant attention to the data and insists upon unrealistic ideas about growth, has hindered the development of other proactive and innovative strategies for dealing with decline. Well-being and quality of life for the local population is a common thread in most newer initiatives in this area. Several case studies show that since full "repopulation" is an unrealistic strategy, and abandonment is politically unacceptable, most policy approaches will be hybrids of mitigation and adaptation (ESPON, 2020a). How then, is it possible to improve the response to these demographic challenges in a way that constructively addresses the complex challenges of such areas without placing the stigma of 'failing to grow' on local and regional entities and societies?

We shall in this final chapter propose a number of consolidated conclusions and recommendations regarding RURALPLAN. This will enable planning authorities to facilitate local and regional innovative planning approaches within a realistic demographic framework, which includes the involvement of citizens and stakeholders from a variety of sectors, including private, public and NGO's.

6.1 New forms of strategic innovative planning (as a response to shrinking)

This Targeted analysis illustrates how the magnitude and complexity of shrinking in rural areas support a great need for innovation in planning, including innovative planning models that provide new concrete solutions and strategies, and a new mindset of strategic planning and policymaking. Regarding the latter, the tight coupling between growth (in population) and development needs to be de-coupled; so, it is possible to plan and create (sustainable) societal development in shrinking regions without population growth. This implies confronting the complex challenges of 'shrinking' and planning for a positive future of resilient local and regional societies in collaboration and co-creation between planning authorities and civil society. In this way, the local politicians', inhabitants, stakeholders, businesses, and NGOs develop and suggest new and innovative strategies, means, and measures based on locally anchored understandings of the good life of the future, within what is a clearly realistic framework. Such an intake of knowledge and a new mindset of a possible future offers a necessary framing for local policy and planning which can be successful.

The RURALPLAN project has developed and successfully tested the RUPIL model, Rural Planning and Innovation Lab, which is an innovative form of planning, as well as facilitating participatory and innovative local or regional approaches capable of dealing with the complex effects of the demographic challenges in strategic master planning founded upon a realistic approach. The RUPIL-model testing suggests that the model provides for local knowledge, adding to the more traditional knowledge base of planning, and new and more tailor-made contemporary strategies and solutions.

The analysis of the test cases suggests that RUPIL contributes towards a shift in perspective on planning from the traditional growth paradigm towards one which is more realistic in its expectations, and where development is understood more broadly than population growth. This may be a challenging conceptual shift, and therefore we have highlighted issues to be considered in the policy recommendations below.

Based on the testing and the analysis thereof, we acknowledge the RUPIL model's usability and contextual flexibility, as well as its innovative and co-design elements. As a result of this project, RURALPLAN provides a low-threshold practical approach, available online. It is an easily accessible tool that can be further shared amongst European local and regional planning authorities and communities.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

Twelve policy recommendations derived from the RURALPLAN project are highlighted below.

Local planning in shrinking regions in Europe must integrate demographic changes in a realistic manner and make it a key part of the process, at all relevant levels and types of local planning. Do not ignore the difficulties or conflicts that population decline brings, for example, connected with changes in the location of schools and other services, in prioritization between measures directed at the young and the elderly.

Although a realistic and evidence-based approach and starting point are needed, the framing and narratives connected to the planning processes should emphasize to disassociate shrinking from failure, and then focus on how to develop a good life connected with a sustainable social, economic, and environmental local development.

Discussion in workshops needs to be carefully steered throughout the process in order that it is kept within a realistic and feasible framework, and focused on co-creation and common responsibilities including asking the question “what we can do” rather than “what others should do”.

Citizen participation is crucial for dealing with shrinkage in an effective manner. Working together with a broad set of local government, non-governmental organizations, residents, volunteers, business, and entrepreneurs to create new partnerships and achieve acceptance/legitimacy between local actors is essential. Include newcomers. Local or regional participation and co-creation provide a good basis for innovation as well as implementation when a diverse set of actors are engaged.

Local politicians should participate in the local planning processes (RUPIL) as equal participants. This is important for legitimacy, make good use of available resources, sharing knowledge and understanding.

To be able to implement innovative and tailor-made solutions and strategies, local governments and actors need a wide space (leeway) in which to manoeuvre, as strategies or solutions often do not fit into existing frameworks and traditions and the demand placed on social actors is to take on new roles and engage in co-production with new partners.

Recognize that dealing with decline involves cross-sectoral, inter-municipal, and multi-level governmental collaboration; which means that various segments of the local or regional government or authority should participate in the process.

RUPIL may be applied as a main approach to seek and develop innovative strategies and solutions in the planning process, or as a vital part of the process itself. RUPIL will be most advantageous if it frames the whole local societal planning process, and not "only" a part of it. Anyhow, the RUPIL workshops must be tailored to the local planning context and the planning phases implemented.

RUPIL should not be performed as an "isolated" activity, but must be anchored in the formal local governance of planning. This is necessary to achieve necessary legitimacy and anchoring, within the political and administrative realm, as well as by local actors and people.

Updated statistics and analysis related to demographic changes must be easily available for local governments, and at as detailed territorial level as possible. In many contexts, this will be best facilitated by the relevant regional governments.

Knowledge and competence to perform the RUPIL process locally must be secured. For rural municipalities/regions with a relatively high level of competence in planning and innovation, RUPIL is self-instructive using the Toolbox.

Set up and finance a national or regional "Planning Practical Taskforce" holding the necessary planning and facilitation competence, to add to small entities' planning capacity in practice, including the use of RUPIL. These should be made available at a national or regional level, according to context.

6.3 Further RD&I work

We have learned that research conducted in cooperation with local and regional authorities advances the concepts, theories, and models for rural planning that recognize demographic challenges and shrinkage. There are however several interesting strands of RDI to follow, based on the Targeted Analysis RURALPLAN in the short and long term.

Implementation

What was the impact of RURALPLAN on planning, policy, and actions in the pilot cases?

In all case countries – Norway, Sweden, as well as in Switzerland - participatory planning processes have been well-established for quite some years. RURALPLAN however added a new, innovative, co-designing element to it. It also promoted ideas from outside and there is also the hope that projects such as RURALPLAN will help to change the mindset of the inhabitants in terms of what constitutes key problems in a depopulating society and what solutions might be realistically implemented on local and regional levels. With a realistic approach to planning in shrinking areas, new ideas can come to the fore, for example the opportunity to consider new forms of housing (eg. housing cooperatives), mobility (eg. car sharing, mobility platforms) and other initiatives of benefit to rural areas, but until now rarely accepted.

However, we know from previous research that changes in planning perspectives are hard to accomplish. Therefore, further research might be undertaken on key elements that trigger/facilitate changes in rural planning perspectives.

Diffusion

Diffusion of results is not a part of this Targeted Analysis. Therefore, one question is how RUPIL with the Toolbox can be developed into an easily accessible and usable tool for rural areas in Europe.

From a research point of view, the RUPIL model could be studied comparatively -. in different settings - to explore how new and innovative planning perspectives emerge, the methods used to foster such shifts, and the conditions under which these changes occur in rural planning contexts.

How can nations, regions, and education contribute to increasing the vitally important planning and facilitation competence, along with the capacity of rural planning authorities and their uptake of innovative planning that breaks with established planning practices; making it possible to deal with complex problems related to endogenous (demographic change) and inflicted exogenous challenges (such as energy needs)?

Previous research shows that small and depopulating municipalities and regions often lack access to specialized planning expertise. However, they demonstrate strengths in general knowledge and holistic approaches to planning, as their processes are less confined by silos.

Given the difficulties these municipalities face in adopting and implementing new planning methods—particularly those centred on realism rather than growth aspirations—it is crucial to examine how external support can facilitate such efforts. We recommend a comparative study to explore national, regional, and academic initiatives aimed at supporting realistic planning in depopulating areas. Understanding how knowledge transfer and support vary across states could identify best practices and inform more effective strategies for empowering municipalities in similar contexts.

How to mobilize and engage necessary resources in rural areas with demographic challenges?

We know that rural regions with demographic challenges have more difficulties in mobilizing resources compared to cities. How can innovative strategic planning engage different tiers and levels of government as well as local resources in planning as well as action?

Is it possible for local or regional civil society to use this model in their own societal development processes?

We contend that it is possible for local or regional civil society to apply this model in their planning processes, provided that certain conditions are met. As suggested above, the model must be available in the national languages to ensure broad accessibility. It should also be user-friendly and visually appealing to facilitate understanding and engagement. In addition, knowledge support is essential — this could include AI-driven teaching tools or other forms of guidance from regional or state

authorities to ensure effective implementation and utilisation. However, the usefulness of the model will most likely also depend on a variety of place-based factors, e.g. available resources, planning culture, access to qualified planning expertise, etc. It would therefore be interesting to see which conditions in the local planning culture have an influence on the implementation of this planning tool.

Policy

This Targeted Analysis has through the literature study revealed how sparse and often inadequate planning responses are to demographic challenges and shrinking.

Further research should investigate national and regional policy responses in Europe, considering the consequences of adaptability to the actual local and regional contexts, and if and how the national policies provide leeway and space for innovative strategies and new types of societal goals.

Theory

The Targeted analysis RURALPLAN, takes its point of departure from the theory of innovative planning and includes innovative methods in planning.

Even so, there is still a gap in theory development that addresses democratic and innovative planning in theory and practice.

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