

Doing things differently: co-producing responses to urban shrinkage

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Introduction

The Cities of Tomorrow report (Commission of the European Communities, 2011) can be seen as the first European-level attempt to make a coherent case for investing in growing as well as declining urban areas. The proposals contained in Cities of Tomorrow also reflect the principles of the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) policy framework which underpins the structural programmes within the Common Strategic Framework (European Commission, 2011). Hence we can expect that significant proportions of resources will become available to cities during the 2014–2020 programming period through the structural programmes which should provide a very significant opportunity to advance collaborative, integrated urban development initiatives. However, the ongoing economic downturn and fiscal austerity across Europe raises questions about the types of cities which realistically can make a contribution towards achieving the 2020 goals. Should the established policy rationales for economic growth continue to dominate the new programming period (European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2010), we can expect that cities with significant economic growth potential are likely to attract the lion's share of structural investments, while the many cities with poor growth potential will fall further behind. Such an interpretation of the 2020 goals would not only undermine attempts to reverse decline through socio-economic regeneration initiatives in shrinking cities, but it would also harbour the danger of weakening the capacity of declining areas to create integrated and collaborative initiatives which are essential to tackle urban shrinkage.

There is another reason why shrinking cities should not be sidelined in public sector investment decisions. Not only might investment in shrinking cities buffer the knock-on effects deep socio-economic decline might have on territorial cohesion and regional development in Europe's growth nodes but, perhaps more importantly, shrinking cities offer scope to test out new ways to tackle decline by bringing about forms of socio-economic development that are not rooted in narrow economic terms but focus more on non-materialistic attributes of wellbeing (Sustainable Development Commission, 2007). Each chapter in this volume shows that shrinking cities have significant scope to explore and promote innovative collaborative practices that respond to and take advantage of long-term decline. A common feature that links all contributions here is that improvements are largely based on and initiated through available local resources. This would seem important in these times of unprecedented budgetary austerity where investments from external sources are rare and more often than not a short-term sticking plaster than a long-term solution. However, shrinking cities should not be sidelined in public sector investment decisions. Resources are needed, but these should be targeted at fulfilling essential functions differently, rather than adding new initiatives to already over-burdened public agencies. Hence we should call for

investments in reducing service infrastructure, retrofitting buildings and open spaces, encouraging the social economy and resist proposals for new shopping malls, leisure centres, business parks and innovation hubs in places that have been sidelined in the global fight for investment and labour. Innovation is needed, and shrinking cities need to find ways of doing things differently compared to their past, but guiding principles might need to be rooted in ideas around the post-growth economy (Paech, 2012), rather than pursuing relentless profit-oriented economic growth.

Some scholars suggest that national and European policy needs to focus more explicitly on the needs of shrinking cities and that a market led recovery cannot be relied upon (Bernt *et al.*, 2012; Wiechmann, 2012). The importance of government in shaping places has recently been explored by Pollitt (2012). Governments can ‘make or break’ places and their impact on the physical, economic and social fabric of a city, but also on the personal commitment of citizens towards their local community, cannot be underestimated. Yet current developments in shrinking cities might suggest that governments across Europe are trying to withdraw from shrinking places and invest in ‘growth nodes’. A recent OECD report on shrinkage and demographic change warns that governments cannot rely on the market to halt or reverse the process of urban shrinkage, but calls for supporting public agencies in developing their abilities to engage local stakeholders to collaboratively create new places out of decline and shrinkage seem to go unheard (Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2012).

If macro level developments, which are largely beyond the control of national let alone local actors, determine the overall development trajectory of cities, then local responses to manage the process of shrinkage must be given some priority in funding decisions, whether through CLLD or national policy instruments. Money is essential of course, but funding alone is not sufficient to encourage citizens to engage in planning the future of their city, particularly not when their primary concern is to find employment and better public services elsewhere. We need to provide tools and concepts that enable local leaders in the public, private and third sector to maintain or create partnerships even when there are no or very limited new financial resources to be distributed. We need new models which show how civil society organisations can be supported in alleviating poverty and exclusion in a context of continuous budgetary austerity. The examples contained in this volume go some way towards illustrating possible approaches, but examples are context specific and as such have limited utility in transferring knowledge of effective response to shrinkage. There is a need to develop concepts on how cities can respond to shrinkage which identify principles of effective actions that can be adapted to different contexts. Co-production is one such promising concept.

Co-producing change

The concept of co-production currently receives much attention from a wide range of scholars, policymakers and practitioners, who recognise that the magnitude and complexity of the socio-economic challenges we face require collaborative responses (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012; Osborne, 2010; Evers and Laville, 2004; Alford and O’Flynn, 2012). In developing conceptual links between co-production, governance and civil society Pestoff

points to important impacts that can result from collaborative service provision, such as citizen empowerment, strengthening representative democracy and organisational change in public sector agencies (Pestoff, 2009; Pestoff, 2012b). The rapidly growing number of empirical studies which employ the conceptual lens of co-production, for example in relation to care services, poverty reduction, housing, education, infrastructure maintenance and more, suggest that the concept of co-production might become a catalyst which changes the way in which societies organise the provision of services (Pestoff *et al.*, 2012; Farmer *et al.*, 2012; Schlappa and Imani, 2012; Verschuere *et al.*, 2012b; Schlappa, 2012).

Co-production theory can be employed to explore and facilitate strategic and service level changes in shrinking cities. Pestoff *et al.* (2012) distinguish between co-production, co-management and co-governance:

- Co-production refers to an arrangement where citizens produce, at least in part, the services they use themselves. This can be with or without the direct involvement of government officials but must include public resources of some kind.
- Co-management refers to a situation where different organisations work alongside each other to manage the delivery of a service. For co-management to occur, individual actors use the respective resources they control to directly contribute to the delivery of a service.
- Co-governance is about actors from different organisations and sectors coming together to determine policy priorities and to translate these into strategic plans for the provision of public services.

(Pestoff, 2012a: 18)

Thus co-production conceives of the provision of public services as a process which brings citizens as individuals or groups together with public sector organisations to jointly create desired services as well as higher level strategic outcomes.

The following case study of the small German manufacturing town of Altena, located on the edge of the Ruhrgebiet, illustrates how the problems associated with long-term urban shrinkage can be tackled by fostering co-production. The case study is based on two recent URBACT projects designed to explore the nature of urban shrinkage and potential responses to it (Schlappa and Neill, 2013; OP-ACT, 2012).

The case of Altena

Altena's history as a mining and manufacturing town stretches back over several centuries. The town's prosperity peaked during the nineteenth and early twentieth century but from the 1970s onwards Altena started to lose large parts of its industries. Between 1974 and 2012 the number of jobs declined by almost 50 per cent and the population shrank from 32,000 to 18,000. The municipality expects to continue to shrink by 1.5–3 per cent each year over the next 20 years, reaching an 'equilibrium' at around 12,000 residents in 2030. While local

unemployment is below the national average, Altena has one of the highest proportions of welfare benefit claimants in the state region of North Rhine Westphalia, because a large percentage of the population are of retirement age and therefore not economically active. The ongoing loss of jobs brought with it the outward migration of economically active residents which in turn has resulted in rapidly falling property values, reduced municipal revenues, deteriorating services and physical infrastructures. From a regional policy perspective the problems Altena faces are a low priority however. Public and in particular European investments are channelled into the larger cities in the conurbation with better growth potential. Without a credible perspective on how the town could reverse the spiral of decline those who have the means to do so carry on moving to other places with better prospects.

Facing up to denial

Since the 1960s Altena was run by administrations which pursued policies based on the assumption that the shrinkage process would be reversed at some point in the future. Infrastructure and services therefore needed to be maintained as much as possible until growth returned. When at the end of the 1990s a new administration came into office, achieving growth was no longer a credible strategic objective; instead, the reduction of services and infrastructures became the immediate strategic priority. Despite clear evidence and rational arguments for the downsizing of services and infrastructure, the new mayor struggled to 'open the eyes' of citizens to the reality and persistence of shrinkage. Any reduction of service levels and in particular the closure of facilities such as the swimming pool, schools, libraries and nurseries was met with fierce protest from residents.

A communications strategy aimed at raising Altena's profile as a city in need of support and which emphasised that Altena was the city with the highest degree of population loss in Germany did not unlock additional resources, neither did it change the attitudes of local citizens. When the mayor used a prime-time television broadcast to describe Altena as a city with no hope of ever regaining its former economic prosperity the citizens of Altena were outraged. They felt betrayed – their leader had 'accepted defeat'.

The municipality continued with acrimonious closures of local facilities while the mayor continued to tackle deep-rooted denial about the reality of shrinkage among local politicians, officials and citizens. Reducing the size of the municipality to the legally required minimum of staff and taking symbolic actions such as replacing the mayoral Mercedes with a VW Polo did demonstrate that public agencies and officials were not insulated from the consequences of responding to shrinkage and decline. However, the measures taken did little to halt the shrinkage process: economically active families left the city if they could, retailers closed their shops and more homes stood empty.

Co-producing strategy

This period, marked by lack of dialogue about possible alternatives between citizens and municipality, came to an end when in 2005 the Bertelsmann Foundation sponsored a research project designed to explore how small cities could address the challenges associated with an

ageing population. Between 2006 and 2008 a wide range of analytical and envisioning workshops were held to explore active ageing in Altena (<http://www.altena.de/Projektverlauf.756.0.html>). This project generated a wide-ranging public debate which, once started, went far beyond its original purpose and began to explore what the people of Altena could do themselves to improve their situation. Officials, politicians and citizens used this project to create a platform for strategic planning and to re-envision the future of Altena, where the quality of life would improve through measures that directly responded to shrinkage but which were different from those tried in the past. This requires a change in the mindset of local actors, away from ideas about strengthening economic competitiveness and reversing population loss and towards finding ways of controlling and if possible benefitting from the shrinkage process. For example, older people remained at the centre of this strategy, but rather than being seen as a problem and a burden on the public purse, older people were now perceived as having a key role in reversing the fortunes of Altena through the skills and resources they had control over.

After two years of deliberation and debate the city put forward an integrated development concept with almost 300 actions, which were focused on managing shrinkage and creating new choices. The principle underpinning this strategy was that citizens had to contribute in some way to the services and improvements they wanted to see. The extent of collaborative action in strategic planning and implementation was unprecedented and ongoing. In 2011 Altena was awarded the highly coveted Martin Leicht Preis for Urban and Regional Development (Stadt Altena, 2011) for its collaborative and cross-cutting strategy. This provided confirmation for municipality and citizens that they were on the right track to develop actions that could deal with the spiral of decline Altena found itself in.

Co-producing services and physical improvements

The vision of Altena's future shifted away from ideas that could recreate the kind of economic growth that had brought jobs and prosperity in the past and focused on changes that could be achieved with the resources local agencies and citizens had control over. One of the top priorities in this new vision was to encourage volunteering, which included reviving the local voluntary sector networks which had been starved of resources for years. The local volunteer exchange bureau was given office space and modest resources to connect volunteers with people in need of support, such as shopping, transport or home maintenance. Combining funding for small projects with access to municipal buildings enabled citizens to provide arts and fitness classes, healthy living and falls prevention workshops, after-school clubs, youth and sport clubs and more. Decisions on what to do, and where and how, were taken collectively between public agencies and residents. Although not free from tensions and conflicting ideas, citizens and officials combined their resources and expertise to co-manage and co-produce the service outcomes both parties desired.

A pivotal project which consolidated collaborative relationships between municipality and citizens was the pedestrianisation of a central area of the town. Improvements to roads along the river had been in the planning stages for many years, but the lack of funding meant that project proposals were rolled forward periodically. In the newly found spirit of collaborative

action the municipality purchased the building materials, arranged for road closures at weekends and called on the people of Altena to ‘get their hands dirty’. Staff of the municipality, including the mayor, worked alongside traders and residents over several months to create a new pedestrian area in the town centre. Where in the past it seemed impossible to achieve improvements through established contracting and funding procedures, this project demonstrated successfully that budgetary as well as regulatory frameworks could be ‘stretched’ to accommodate new ways of working which generated tangible improvements.

Co-producing economic development

Collaborations with residents also extend into economic development initiatives. This includes the establishment of a mini supermarket in a neighbourhood where the last retailer closed in the 1990s. The supermarket is owned by residents of the neighbourhood which it serves, who are the shareholders. The municipality acts as a guarantor to manage commercial risk in the early stages of the enterprise.

Utilising existing natural and cultural resources formed another part of the economic development strategy. Altena has a range of locational assets for which an earlier URBACT project, that explored urban shrinkage and demographic change, coined the term ‘unpolished diamonds’ (OP-ACT, 2012; Schwedler, 2012). One of these assets is the river Lenne, which was obscured by structures designed to control seasonal flood waters. Using resources destined for the maintenance of flood defences a number of low cost projects were implemented which opened up new vistas and provided pedestrian access to the shoreline. This in turn encouraged local entrepreneurs to set up two new cafés along the riverfront.

The second ‘unpolished diamond’ was the medieval Altena castle, located on cliffs above the town. Each year the castle receives approximately 100,000 visitors, but only about 5,000 of them find their way into the town centre because the roads that serve the castle bypass Altena. The strategy process that had started with a focus on older people resulted in a complete rethink of how the castle could be used to generate benefits for Altena. Instead of creating a ‘rival’ attraction in Altena, which required heavy investments in infrastructure that could only be realised with governmental support, the idea of building an elevator into the cliff face emerged. In collaboration with a private investor and local residents the municipality was able to create this facility at no financial cost to itself. The elevator opened in spring 2014 and now takes visitors from the castle directly into the town centre. This project is now spawning other developments, such as plans for an ‘arts village’ based on the pop-up-shop concept. Here local groups, charities, artisans and producers would utilise empty shops and other premises which the municipality would make available to them at no charge or at very low rents.

These and other initiatives which cannot be explored here are showing the first signs of having a wider impact on Altena. The domestic property market is pointing to a growth in sales for the first time in decades, and in 2013 the city recorded the first increase in the number of young adults in 30 years: there were an additional five people between 25–30

years of age in Altena, a small increase but above the national average for cities in Germany. Citizens also seem to agree with the strategic approach taken to address Altena's decline; they re-elected their mayor for a fourth time in May 2014.

Discussion

The case of Altena is characteristic of shrinking cities across Europe and elsewhere, in that industrial restructuring eroded the economic base to such an extent that after a relatively brief period of decline these cities had lost their *raison d'être*. Within just two or three decades a city, regardless of whether it was once a mighty industrial powerhouse like Detroit in the United States (see chapter 2 in this volume) or a medium-sized city in Europe (see chapter 3 in this volume), is left struggling to establish a new rationale for continued existence in its current form. Frequently cities adopt economic development based approaches inspired by neoliberal ideas, for example so called 'flagship projects' intended to reaffirm and resurrect the industrial and political might of a once powerful city. This is often associated with the relaxation of planning controls which, as illustrated so well in the case of Detroit, can fuel a housing boom which creates short term financial gain for developers and long-term financial pressures on governmental agencies. A growing number of case studies suggest that such strategies often fail to revitalise cities and that a departure from growth- and market-based principles of urban development is required to create openings for more creative and perhaps more sustainable solutions (Haase *et al.*, 2013; Rink *et al.*, 2014; Rink *et al.*, 2012).

Like most cities caught up in long-term decline, Altena struggled to tackle shrinkage proactively, for several decades hoping for an economic upturn which would reverse its fortunes. As Altena did not have the scope to develop flagship projects it nurtured its remaining industry and service infrastructure with an ever decreasing revenue base. This approach did not help and in some ways made matters worse because the population continued to decline which in turn reduced opportunities to reverse decline and exacerbated the problems it faced.

It can be expected that small towns like Altena struggle to influence regional investment decisions or to affect the integration of different governmental funding streams so that they can be bundled into cross-cutting strategies. A more forward thinking policy mix could make a difference, particularly if regional spatial planning is supported by joined up governance approaches and a degree of resource redistribution from growth to distressed areas. But this tends to be absent in many European countries, resulting in competition between declining cities for limited resources and opportunities. For example a city might invest in superior leisure facilities for families with children to find that a neighbouring city is pursuing the same strategy; thus both cities have used scarce resources to create a new budgetary liability without necessarily attracting or retaining economically active residents.

A cursory review of current structural policy suggests that shrinking cities face formidable barriers in relation to national and European policy frameworks because the resolute focus on growth does not encourage shrinking cities to address denial and face the reality of long-term decline. Instead we can expect that cities will endeavour to maintain an appearance of having

potential for ‘growth’ to enhance their chances of securing some of the resources available through the Europe 2020 strategy. Thus we might see proposals for new transport links or industrial parks which are unlikely to reverse decline or, in the worst cases, new resources might be used to prop up existing institutions, infrastructures and services instead of adjusting them to a declining population and economy. While the Europe 2020 strategy is unlikely to prioritise investment in shrinking cities, it does offer scope to support them in projects where the focus of investment is on ‘doing things differently’ rather than ‘doing different things’. As previous strategies of dealing with decline have not worked, we should not encourage the shrinking city to add the latest initiative to create jobs and material prosperity that might have proven to work in places that are not in long-term decline. New ways of managing and ‘developing’ a shrinking city must be found, and these might be aimed at enhancing the quality of life and wellbeing of residents in ways other than through financial gain and profit-oriented economic development. Co-production provides a useful conceptual framework to create such new perspectives and initiatives which reform administrative, governance and strategy processes in collaboration with citizens and other local stakeholders. The case of Altena suggests that such reforms do not require significant external investments. However, the drawn-out and painful learning process illustrated here can be shortened somewhat by targeted capacity building and investments to assist a city in finding ways to ‘shrink smart’ (Bernt *et al.*, 2012). Citizens require support to move from the articulation of individual or collective needs towards effectively contributing to strategy and the delivery of tangible services (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Crosby *et al.*, 2010; von Hippel, 2005). Service professionals and politicians, on the other hand, need to develop their capabilities to engage in co-productive relationships (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Brookes and Grint, 2010; Bovaird and Löffler, 2012; Loeffler *et al.*, 2008; Loeffler *et al.*, 2012).

Although cities in decline may have very limited resources to experiment with the development of new ways of responding to shrinkage, the pressures that have built up through the shrinkage process might be a lever to overcome institutional barriers to collaboration with local communities and across different societal sectors and organisations. It is of course not realistic to expect that municipalities and citizens will simply transform existing processes into a co-productive system of governance, management and service delivery because they accept the reality of decline. At these times of continued and severe budgetary austerity it seems important to work on the development of tools which facilitate the creation of initiatives that are based on the existing capabilities and resources local actors have access to and can control. While this does not remove the need for the development of policy that specifically deals with urban shrinkage at national and European levels, the suggestions put forward below would provide some immediate support for the many European cities caught up in an ongoing spiral of decline.

Implications for policy and practice

The time is right to explore more fully the utility and benefits of this framework for

policymakers and practitioners in tackling the problems our cities are facing up to. While there are still some ambiguities in the use of co-production as a terminology that refers to collaboration between citizens and officials (Schlappa and Ramsden, 2011), scholars have begun to systematise a growing body of research to develop a coherent theory of co-production (Pestoff *et al.*, 2012; Verschuere *et al.*, 2012b) and much research on co-production is in progress. Supporting policymakers and practitioners in developing competences required for co-production should be an immediate priority for European policy. The wealth of case studies, practical tools and guidance on collaborative regeneration practice which resides within networks such as URBACT, Eurocities or the European Urban Knowledge Network could be used immediately for capacity building but would benefit from a systematic review to facilitate some integration and better identification of cases of co-production.

The good practices of integrated regeneration which have been developed since the LEADER and URBAN programmes over the past 30 years must be promoted and supported through financial assistance for shrinking cities. Integration and collaboration are key for shrinking cities. Hence investments through the structural instruments over the 2014–2020 programming period should be used to enhance and consolidate the capacity of shrinking cities to apply principles of integrated and sustainable regeneration. However, adapting effective integrated regeneration interventions is the key challenge here because the assumptions underpinning much of what we know to be effective interventions are based on the notion that economic competitiveness needs to be enhanced. Not only must policymakers at all levels be alert to ensure that shrinking cities are not left further behind when difficult decisions are made on where to prioritise investment, they must also be wary of proposals which add to, rather than reduce, the commitments municipalities have. Doing things differently, rather than finding different things to do because funding is made available to do them, is the key here. Finding ways of shrinking smart requires innovation and for a city in decline the most important resources to foster innovation are its citizens, its professionals and its local entrepreneurs. European and national programmes should be more responsive to the innovative proposals that emerge from shrinking cities, instead of expecting such cities to fulfil neoliberal ambitions of achieving superior competitive advantage and continuous growth.

Municipalities cannot build the cities of tomorrow on their own, and if the market cannot be relied upon to address the causes and consequences of urban decline then developing the capacity of public officials and citizens to engage in co-productive actions should be an immediate priority for national as well as European urban policy. The transfer of effective practice concerned with the involvement of citizens in the provision of publicly funded services is therefore another priority for national and European policy at this time of unprecedented budgetary austerity. As the conceptual lens of co-production focuses our analytical gaze on the actors who co-produce we can detach ourselves from a discourse about institutional differences, so often the excuse for not pursuing a transfer of effective practices between countries or even within the same country. By focusing on the practice of co-production we are led towards a discourse on competencies, capabilities and behaviours – all

of which are eminently more transferable than suggestions for organisational, regulatory or policy change on which much of the knowledge transfer is currently based in Europe. More work on the exploration of good practice transfer is required, particularly in relation to smaller cities affected by decline and shrinkage. Not only because they tend to lack resources to engage knowledge exchange networks but also because they do not seem to attract the attention of researchers or funders that larger cities do.

The pressure to renew and innovate local governance and service provision makes shrinking cities promising locations to advance our understanding of the co-production process. Taking into account that current gaps in knowledge are primarily concerned with the motivations and the process of co-production (Verschuere *et al.*, 2012a), a research agenda which would assist in upscaling collaborative practice as a response to the challenges shrinking cities encounter should include the further development of analytical and capacity building tools in relation to strategy and service development in urban regeneration contexts. This would include exploring the competencies and motivations which underpin co-production involving policy makers, service professionals and citizens, as well as the analysis of organisational capabilities which facilitate co-production.

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