This research aims at exploring changing governance structures in European shrinking cities as a response to a declining population. By untangling and explaining the complexity of institutionalized governance structures, habits, and routines it points to why and how some shrinking cities turn to loosening or tightening the amount and diversity of actors involved in decision-making for shrinkage.

Scholars emphasize that the process of shrinkage is “complex”. Hospers (2014: 1514) adds, that it is a “complex urban governance process” and Rocak et al. (2016) stress that in order to ensure a sustainable future in shrinking cities, collaborative efforts of civil society and public institutions are necessary. The term “governance” implies that there is not the single government being in charge of decision-making. By using this definition, the procedural and “living” character of governance is put to the front, emphasizing that it is a form of a system that does not have strict and clear boundaries and can change over time. (see also Boons et al., 2009) Responding to shrinkage has become – or is increasingly becoming – a task of many parties involved such as local governments, nonprofit organizations, artists, entrepreneurs, architects, planners, civil society and so on (Audirac, 2018). Whether this might be a positive or negative development remains to be discussed, but we can certainly observe new forms of networks and collaborations being developed in times of shrinkage – a shift in governance arrangements. The many examples of responses to shrinkage show that some governance structures are more susceptible to flexibility and opening of rigid structures. Therefore, questions arise to explore the actors involved in governance for accommodating shrinkage and more specifically ask what the roles of the involved actors in decision-making processes are.

Further, as complexity and uncertainty about future developments characterize todays’ planning and decision-making processes, shrinkage is a prime example of unexpected and non-linear trajectories. Some scholars in the field of uncertainty turn to complexity in order to make sense of those (see for example De Roo et al., 2012; Portugali, 2011; Batty, 2013). Mainly, it is the characteristic of complexity theory which rejects determinism and predictability (Cilliers, 2002) and emphasizes the importance of adaptive capacity. Portugali (2006) argues that cities show the key behavioral tendencies of complex adaptive systems when responding to changes such as demographic changes, economic trends, technological innovations and so on. Hence, this research asks how uncertainties are shaping the decision-making process for accommodating shrinking cities and to what extent uncertainties are actually included, acknowledged, and worked with in decision-making.

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