



3S RECIPE - Smart Shrinkage Solutions

Fostering Resilient Cities in Inner Peripheries of Europe

MAASTRICHT (NL) POLICY BRIEF #3 • LIVEABILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Urban shrinkage is about more than population decline. It may undermine local communities and quality of life. This policy brief unravels and tests local policies to maintain or even improve liveability in the case of Maastricht, the Netherlands. Before studying actual policies, the brief first discusses the various and changing interpretations of the concept of liveability. **In the Dutch context, liveability is seen to be closely related to neighbourhood-level**



population compositions. Concentrations of disadvantage are considered threats to liveability by policymakers. The brief therefore looks at policies aiming to mix socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the face of shrinkage. It discusses the intended benefits and necessary conditions, before assessing the future performance of such policies. The brief also pays attention to criticisms of such social mixing policies.

INTRODUCTION

Urban shrinkage has potentially major consequences for regions, cities and neighbourhoods in terms of economy and liveability. This policy brief zooms in on the latter, liveability, focusing on the case of Maastricht, the Netherlands. While the city of Maastricht is stable in population size, it continues to face similar challenges, whilst being located in a shrinking urban region. The policy brief addresses the key question **how policy interventions can preserve or improve neighbourhood liveability in the face of urban shrinkage.**

The meaning of the concept of liveability is often unclear, however, and the mechanisms through which population decline may thus influence liveability are similarly left vague. It is important to recognize that the meaning of liveability differs between countries and is liable to change over time. To illustrate, in the Netherlands the concept has a long history and its interpretation and mobilization have shifted multiple times ([Kaal 2011](#)). Since the 1990s, liveability in the Dutch context has a strong **social component** as it is directly linked to **population composition**. Particularly the

spatial concentration of certain population groups is deemed problematic by governing officials as it is seen to undermine neighbourhood liveability. This interpretation of liveability typically also includes a strong safety component.

To be sure, the concept of liveability does not only have a social component in its current interpretation. There is also an alternative interpretation of liveability, which focuses more on the physical environment and quality of life aspects, such as air quality, pollution, traffic, walkability, and greenspace access. Examples of both the social and physical interpretation of liveability also exist in the case of Maastricht. This policy brief focuses specifically on the social interpretation of liveability.

The social operationalization of liveability is rooted in normative assumptions that concentrations of disadvantage, poverty and ethnic minorities pose a threat to liveability. In the 2000s, the assumed **link between neighbourhood liveability and population composition was formalized** through statistical indicators developed by or for the state, notably the so-called Liveability Index (Dutch: *Leefbaarometer*). The Liveability Index gauges levels of liveability on low spatial scales, drawing on a wide range of variables. Among the most important predictors of liveability in the model are population variables such as the share of ethnic minorities and the share of unemployed residents, and variables such as homeownership rates. Hiding behind a veil of statistical objectivity and neutrality, “the index encodes a specific understanding of what good neighbourhoods are; they have high homeownership rates, high house prices, low unemployment rates, high income levels, and a low presence of ethnic minorities. That the Liveability Index in practice measures status might explain its intuitive appeal.” ([Uitermark, Hochstenbach and Van Gent 2017, p.64](#)).

SOCIAL MIX POLICIES: A KEY MECHANISM TO MAKE DEPRIVED AREAS LIVEABLE

Linking population composition and liveability

Academic studies have defined two main reasons why concentrations of certain populations are seen problematic and a threat to liveability. First, there is **the neighbourhood effect thesis**: living in poverty or other concentrations may negatively influence one’s future **life chances**, e.g. through a lack of resourceful social networks, positive role models, neighbourhood stigma or access to high quality amenities. While academic research highlights that the size of such neighbourhood effects tends to remain fairly limited and conditional, especially in contexts where segregation levels are relatively muted ([Miltenburg 2017](#)), the idea is very strong among policymakers. In fact, in one interview a stakeholder formulated the neighbourhood effects thesis while immediately conceding that s/he had no idea whether it was supported by academic evidence.



Second, policymakers aim to disperse population concentrations in order to maintain – or regain – **social order and control** over a neighbourhood ([Uitermark 2003](#)). Policymakers fear that when problems accumulate, they may spiral out of control making it ever more difficult for the state to exercise power. This threatens the state's ability to effectively intervene and execute regular urban policies, contributing to local social problems spiralling out of control. It was mentioned by stakeholders in Maastricht but also in previous research in Rotterdam ([Van Gent, Hochstenbach & Uitermark 2018](#)), that problem accumulation means that local resources (finances, labour, etc.) have to be distributed among a bigger population undermining efficient and sufficient allocation. To give an example, the concentration of populations with special needs may put pressure on local health care funds, facilities and caretakers.

Population decline and neighbourhood liveability

Topics of liveability and social mixing are **typically not explicitly linked to urban shrinkage**, but are mostly discussed in the context of major cities. Yet, there are relevant links. Population decline influences population compositions of regions, cities and neighbourhoods and may thus influence liveability as defined above. The selective outmigration of higher-income and upwardly mobile residents implies that most **vulnerable residents are left behind**. Furthermore, population decline may trigger a similar **decline in services and facilities** catering to those residents, further pressurizing liveability. In addition, there are some larger (policy) trends at work as well. National policies cut back on social-rental housing, meaning it increasingly caters to the poorest households (“residualization”), while health care tasks are deinstitutionalized. The combined impact of these policy shifts is that the cheapest social-rental dwellings are increasingly allocated not only to the lowest-income residents but also to those with social or psychological problems and care needs. Since these cheapest social-rental units concentrate in specific neighbourhoods, these policies contribute to the **spatial concentration of multiple disadvantage** ([Van Gent & Hochstenbach 2019](#)).

Additionally, a recurring theme among stakeholders is that for-profit developers are more eager to invest in eye-catchers and profitable projects in the burgeoning inner city. To add to this, municipalities of the South Limburg region, Maastricht included, follow a policy targeting declining post-war neighbourhoods for further selective dilution (see our policy brief on compact city policies). These combined trends may make it **difficult to direct private and public investment to struggling neighbourhoods to address local social problems**. These demographic, economic and institutional shifts are thus likely to have a disproportionate impact on the poorest neighbourhoods in shrinking regions.

The assumed link between population and neighbourhood liveability in Maastricht:

“The aim is a beneficial spread [of vulnerable populations with care need] across the city, to prevent negative consequences for liveability and safety”

- [Wonen en wijken 2017](#), p.17

“Liveability and societal acceptance are under pressure, where [...] a concentration of recently admitted refugees emerges”

- [Wonen en wijken 2017](#), p.81

“We have to find the right balance for a good liveability. And then a mix of dwellings and people helps”

- [Anouk Craps, project leader vulnerable neighbourhoods Maastricht](#)

The trends described above are nevertheless interpreted by stakeholders as a rationale for **social mixing**. That is, they propose policies of **urban restructuring** and **housing differentiation** (i.e. mixing housing of different tenures and prices in distressed neighbourhoods) to break through poverty concentrations and – in doing so – improve neighbourhood liveability. Local policy documents and policymakers make clear links between population composition and neighbourhood liveability (see box below, author translations), even though these assumed links are not in fact tested or proven. Stakeholders propose stronger efforts to socially mix – i.e. alter the population composition – of poor neighbourhoods with the assumption that this makes it easier to govern neighbourhoods, benefits inhabitants of those neighbourhoods and creates neighbourhoods that are more attractive to outsiders.

While the key objective of liveability policy is improving liveability, stakeholders have defined some other broader outcomes that supposedly stand to benefit from Maastricht greater liveability, i.e.:

- **Neighbourhood governability**, given that mixing populations makes it easier for the state to enforce order and control, and to deliver services.

- **Improved life chances** of the people living in deprived neighbourhoods. Improving local facilities and meeting spaces may also not so much improve life chances but at least local quality of life.
- **Strengthened local economy**, the *Urban Vision for 2030* states that “attractive and liveable residential neighbourhoods are important for the economic structure, because next to culture and sports they represent an important location factor” ([Gemeente Maastricht 2005](#), p.29, author translation). In the 2018 coalition agreement of the local government, the causal relationship between economy and liveability is discussed in reverse: “urban functions do not just land in the inner city or office parks, but often outside of these locations, which improves facilities in vulnerable neighbourhoods and increases liveability” ([CDA et al. 2018](#); p.14, author translation)

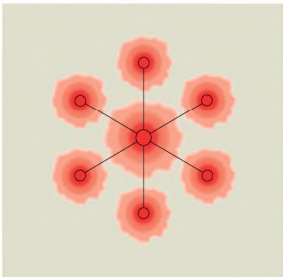
From the policy documents and stakeholder interviews, a range of intended beneficiaries comes to the fore. First, the state and governing institutions are supposed to benefit, as socially mixed neighbourhoods are assumed to be easier to govern and to maintain control over. This will relieve pressure from regular urban policies, allow for a more effective intervention, and reduce the burden for street-level bureaucrats and other policymakers. Second, residents of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods are supposed to benefit, especially those groups that are most tied to the neighbourhood such as elderly, children, the disabled and vulnerable groups. They are more dependent on neighbourhood facilities and ties, and do not visit the city centre often. Third, and more indirectly, all inhabitants of the city are supposed to benefit as investing in mixed neighbourhoods is thought to improve the economic fortunes of the city.

Creating balanced and socially mixed neighbourhoods is thus a key policy goal. Local stakeholders have identified that to achieve this policy successfully several necessary conditions need to be in place.

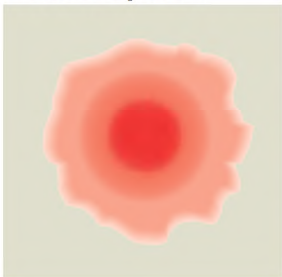
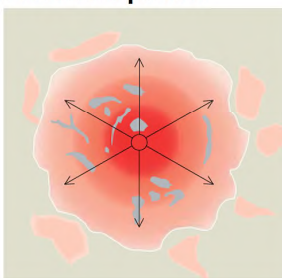
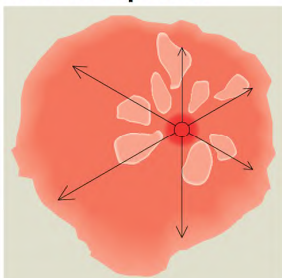
Outcome	What are the necessary conditions that make it happen?
Create balanced and socially mixed neighbourhoods	1. The not-for-profit housing associations should be allowed to provide social housing for a wider range of the population , including middle-income households.
	2. Housing associations need to have the financial and institutional capacity to do so. Instead, national policies have confronted housing associations with additional taxes, and limited their room to manoeuvre, i.e. associations have to limit their activities to their perceived core task of providing housing to low-income populations.
	3. Private investment has to be redirected from well-performing areas and neighbourhoods (e.g. the inner city) to struggling areas. This requires state support.
	4. The neighbourhoods need to have meeting spaces and facilities , even more because the most vulnerable population are generally also confined to their neighbourhood more so than others are.
	5. These neighbourhoods need to be well connected to the central city by public transport, as these populations are generally more dependent on such transport modes.

WOULD SOCIAL MIX POLICIES DELIVER THE SAME BENEFITS IN DIFFERENT FUTURES?

Through stakeholder interviews and a critical analysis of policy documents, we gauged whether the defined necessary conditions are to be in place in different future scenarios. The essential idea is that when these conditions are in place whatever the future brings, we can speak of a robust policy measure that is likely to generate the intended benefits. We drew on the **four following scenarios** for the mid to long-term future (see Lombardi et. al., 2012: Table 2):

New Sustainability Paradigm (NSP)		Key driver: Equity and sustainability
Settlement pattern 	Description An ethos of ‘one planet living’ facilitates a shared vision for more sustainable living and a much improved quality of life. New socio-economic arrangements result in changes to the character of urban industrial civilisation. Local is valued but global links also play a role. A sustainable and more equitable future is emerging from new values, a revised model of development and the active engagement of civil society.	Philosophy The worldview of the <i>New Sustainability Paradigm</i> has few historical precedents, although John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth century political economist, was prescient in theorising a post-industrial and post-scarcity social arrangement based on human development rather than material acquisition (Mill, 1848).






Policy Reform (PR)		Key driver: Economic growth with greater equity
Settlement pattern 	Description <i>Policy Reform</i> depends on comprehensive and coordinated government action for poverty reduction and environmental sustainability, negating trends toward high inequality. The values of consumerism and individualism persist, creating a tension with policies that prioritise sustainability.	Philosophy In <i>Policy Reform</i> , the belief is that markets require strong policy guidance to address inherent tendencies toward economic crisis, social conflict and environmental degradation. John Maynard Keynes, influenced by the Great Depression, is an important predecessor of those who hold that it is necessary to manage capitalism in order to temper its crises (Keynes, 1936).
Market Forces (MF)		Key driver: Competitive, open global markets
Settlement pattern 	Description <i>Market Forces</i> relies on the self-correcting logic of competitive markets. Current demographic, economic, environmental, and technological trends unfold without major surprise. Competitive, open and integrated markets drive world development. Social and environmental concerns are secondary.	Philosophy The <i>Market Forces</i> bias is one of market optimism, the faith that the hidden hand of well-functioning markets is the key to resolving social, economic and environmental problems. An important philosophic antecedent is Adam Smith (1776), while contemporary representatives include many neo-classical economists and free market enthusiasts.
Fortress World (FW)		Key driver: Protection and control of resources
Settlement pattern 	Description Powerful individuals, groups and organisations develop an authoritarian response to the threats of resource scarcity and social breakdown by forming alliances to protect their own interests. Security and defensibility of resources are paramount for these privileged rich elites. An impoverished majority exists outside the fortress. Policy and regulation exist but enforcement may be limited. Armed forces act to impose order, protect the environment and prevent a societal collapse.	Philosophy The <i>Fortress World</i> mindset was foreshadowed by the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1651), who held a pessimistic view of the nature of man and saw the need for powerful leadership. While it is rare to find modern Hobbesians, many people believe, in their resignation and anguish, that some kind of a <i>Fortress World</i> is the logical outcome of the unattended social polarisation and environmental degradation they observe.

The scenario methodology (see Lombardi *et. al.*, 2012), summarized in **Table 1**, reveals substantial differentiation in how the different conditions described above perform in the four future scenarios.

Table 1. The performance of necessary conditions in different future scenarios

Urban Futures Method applied to the 'more city, more rural' policy to promote compact connected city				
Necessary Conditions	New Sustainability Paradigm	Policy Reform	Marker Forces	Fortress World
Social housing for a wider range of the population	Housing is considered a merit good. De-commodified housing will be made available to large share of the population.	Dual options possible. On the one hand, policy may consider decent and affordable housing incompatible with the market / on the other hand, policies may continue down path of economic growth which	The opposite will happen, as market forces implies a residual or absent social-housing sector	In fortress world government retrenches - housing for the poor will become once again dominated by private (slum) landlords

		would be an argument for market housing		
More financial and institutional leeway for housing associations (i.e. social-housing providers)	The aim is an equitable redistribution of resources, also across space. This implies a willingness to invest in housing associations and socially mixed neighbourhoods	The state considers housing associations a strategic partner in this scenario, but may also consider market housing superior to achieve economic growth	Opposite will happen, see point above	Housing associations will be mostly or completely absent; hence, this condition will not be met.
Private investment in struggling areas	Private investment in social goals will be stimulated in this scenario	The state can redirect the market to invest in declining areas. This is also a characteristic of roll-out neoliberalization where state is highly proactive in fuelling investment in certain areas	Market actors will determine profitability again on a case-to-case basis. An accommodating government may be beneficial though	Investment is focused on prime "winner" locations, while even further taken away from struggling areas
Facilitate meeting spaces and facilities	Meeting spaces may perhaps be facilitated, depending whether people's mind-set also changes regarding local ties	State has the capacity to create such publicly financed meeting spaces, perhaps in collaboration with housing associations (see past experiences)	The spatial concentration of disadvantage will lead to a lack of purchasing power in a neighbourhood, therefore unattractive for private entrepreneurial investment. There may be exceptions such as private health care.	High levels of spatial segregation mean little if any interaction between people from different walks of life. Yet, in poor areas there will be facilities by and for disadvantaged groups
Enhance mobility (well-connected neighbourhoods)	Local relations are key and sustainable modes of public transport over somewhat longer distances	Infrastructural investments is considered part of the proactive government role to stimulate individual well-being and economic growth	Transport will be highly individualized leaving vulnerable populations less mobile	Investment in infrastructure will be highly selective in space leaving large parts of cities underserved

Key:  condition highly unlikely to continue in the future  condition is at risk in the future  condition highly likely to continue in the future

As is briefly discussed, the conditions described above are most likely to be in place in the policy reform and new sustainable paradigm scenarios. They are highly uncertain or unlikely in the market forces and fortress world scenarios though. The overarching reason is that investment in disadvantaged areas typically requires active intervention that goes against the market, while market processes typically translate into deeper spatial divides. This inherent uncertainty makes it questionable to what extent effective social mixing strategies can and will be implemented in Maastricht. Indeed, in recent years the capacity of housing associations and local governments to intervene in struggling areas has steadily eroded under conditions of austerity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Maastricht policymakers lament the increase in poverty concentrations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city, fearing this may exacerbate local social problems and undermine liveability. Such fears are reflective of a wider current among Dutch urban professionals. Increasing concentrations are seen as the outcome of national policy changes as well as selective residential mobility patterns of higher-income and upwardly mobile households. Local stakeholders promote intensive policies of social mixing to address liveability problems. Social mixing should dilute potential problems and make government intervention easier and more effective. To be able to successfully implement social mixing policies, various conditions need to be in place. It is questionable to what extent this is the case in different future scenarios. There are also fundamental criticisms of such policies.

First, social mix policies work on the assumption that concentrations of certain populations equate with low levels of neighbourhood liveability. They in fact often see disadvantaged populations as the cause of low neighbourhood liveability. Poor neighbourhoods are then always considered problematic, even when these neighbourhoods in fact fulfil the important role of providing affordable housing in an urban system. Second, the social mixing of disadvantaged

neighbourhoods often triggers reductions in affordable housing not compensated for elsewhere. Neighbourhood-level policies to improve quality of life for disadvantaged populations then at a higher level leads to a reduction of housing for such groups. Third, such policies may be at odds with other municipal strategies of spatially selective concentration and dilution of populations. With these points in mind, we call for the careful implementation of mixing policies that consider the position of affordable neighbourhoods in relation to the wider urban and housing system.

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