

## Urban Shrinkage in France: An Invisible Issue?

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*Translated from the French by Oliver Waine*

### Series: Shrinking Cities

*Although the phenomenon of urban shrinkage affects a significant number of French towns and cities, it is an issue that has so far been the subject of no real debate or dedicated policy at national level. A series of interviews with some of the actors involved in urban policy in France sheds light on the reasons for this long-standing “oversight” – and also reveals signs that “low-pressure housing markets” and devitalized town centres may finally be making it on to the political agenda.*

While urban shrinkage still relatively limited in France compared with other countries, such as Germany or Japan, it is a process that has gained ground in recent years (Cauchi-Duval *et al.* 2017) – a fact that has piqued the interest of researchers, the media and even sections of the urban-planning profession. However, it is an issue that has remained largely absent from French national policies and, unlike in other countries where the paradigm of growth has occasionally been re-examined, shrinking cities have long been the subject of zero debate – zero discourse, even – at national level. Nevertheless, a few recent signs do suggest an increase in awareness of the problems posed by decreasing populations in certain towns, cities and regions. The first of these has been the mobilization of social landlords, the majority of whose housing stock is located in such areas of falling demand. In the face of rising vacancy rates, they have organized lobbying with a view to adapting existing legal and financial tools to the specific difficulties of these territories. Secondly, forums have been created to bring together elected officials, technicians and experts on the issue of the devitalization of trade in small and mid-sized towns and in village centres. Lastly, the publications of geographer and consultant Christophe Guilluy (2014) – on the socio-economic dynamics of different territories and their political consequences – and journalist Olivier Razemon (2016) – on the devitalization of the centres of medium-sized towns – have been the subject of discussion in a number of media outlets. However, despite the intensity of these recent debates, the question of long-term processes of urban decline has yet to find a strong voice nationwide.

In order to comprehend this apparent lack of interest for urban shrinkage, we surveyed a series of national actors who were potentially interested and concerned by this process.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we

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<sup>1</sup> Both authors are participants in the Altergrowth research project, financed by the ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche – National Research Agency) and coordinated by Vincent Béal (University of Strasbourg). This research team included Matthieu Giroud, to whom this article is dedicated.

<sup>2</sup> We first of all conducted interviews with representatives of state departments and major agencies in the fields of housing and urban renewal in order to identify possible measures suited to the specificities of shrinking cities. These interviews were conducted with representatives of the DHUP (Direction de l’Habitat, de l’Urbanisme et des Paysages – Department for Housing, Urban Planning and Landscapes), ANAH (Agence Nationale de l’Habitat – National Housing Agency) and ANRU (Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine – National Urban-Renewal

report our findings and analyse the perceptions of urban shrinkage among these national actors, and the efforts made by certain networks of actors to get this issue on to the political agenda. One key finding to emerge was the fact that certain national measures are mobilized at local level in order to respond to or combat urban shrinkage, even though this was not their intended purpose.<sup>3</sup>

### **Urban shrinkage: a process ignored – or reinforced – by national policies**

Generally speaking, the actors surveyed within central-government departments did not consider urban shrinkage to be a problem that justified the development and implementation of a public policy on a national scale. While it is true that our respondents had in mind examples of cities faced with demographic decline that they often associate with situations of economic crisis provoked by deindustrialization or the concentration of economic activity in metropolitan spaces, urban shrinkage is still analysed as though it is a limited phenomenon, restricted spatially to certain areas and unlikely to affect countries on a wider scale – there’s no need, so the thinking goes, to produce detailed analysis regarding French shrinking cities or to create a national policy to deal with this issue. And yet recent work by Cauchi-Duval *et al.* (2017) shows that, in 2011, a total of 283 out of France’s 771 metropolitan areas – more than one in three – had lower resident populations than in 1990. How can the apparent invisibility of this process of urban decline, as far as national actors are concerned, be explained?

To our mind, this invisibility has several explanations: first of all, the population decline observed primarily concerns small metropolitan areas, whereas the national agenda on territorial policies has been dominated for the last 15 years or so by the aim of reinforcing the reach and attractiveness of large regional metropolises. This choice is legitimized by the theory that the growth of these big cities benefits other territories via a trickle-down effect.<sup>4</sup> In the field of housing, for example, this is demonstrated by changes to bricks-and-mortar subsidies, with a new focus on encouraging the construction of social housing in so-called high-pressure housing markets.<sup>5</sup> In this context, getting the problems affecting shrinking cities on to the political agenda requires strong lobbying of central government on the part of mayors and other elected officials. And yet – and this is the second major difficulty – urban decline is not seen as an issue liable to generate government capacity on the scale of a city. What mayor today would be prepared to publicly admit that his or her city was shrinking? The political risk is too great: it would be interpreted as defeatism, with opponents clamouring to decry the mayor’s lack of ambition. Similarly, what private bank, property developer or corporation today would risk being the long-term partner of a city in a bid to help it back on its feet? Lastly, the

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Agency). We also interviewed several representatives of the CGET (Commissariat Général à l’Égalité des Territoires – General Commission for Territorial Equality), which in the past coordinated policies concerning medium-sized towns and the economic conversion and restructuring of former industrial or military regions. Representatives from the CDC (Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, a state-run financial institution) presented their point of view regarding action in progress. In addition, we met with a number of associations representing the interests of towns and cities in order to find out whether their members, faced with demographic and/or economic decline, were taking action to combat these specific challenges: France Urbaine (which represents large cities and intermunicipal structures), AMF (Association des Maires de France – Association of French Mayors), Villes de France (which represents medium-sized towns), APVF (Association des Petites Villes de France – Association of Small French Towns), and the FNAU (Fédération Nationale des Agences d’Urbanisme – National Federation of Urban-Planning Agencies). Lastly, we met with representatives of the USH (Union Sociale pour l’Habitat – Social-Housing Union), a federation of the different types of social-housing bodies in France (public housing offices, social-housing associations and companies, and cooperatives).

<sup>3</sup> This analysis of local strategies is not developed here, but will be developed in publications deriving directly from the Altergrowth research programme, which is due to come to an end in mid-2018. Readers can keep up to date with this research via the Altergrowth blog: <https://alterpo.hypotheses.org>.

<sup>4</sup> “It is therefore a question of helping the largest cities to act as drivers of growth that in turn benefits all areas” (France Stratégie 2016, p. 1).

<sup>5</sup> The degree of pressure of a local housing market is defined using the sole criterion of pressure on the private rental market. This definition has been criticized by a number of experts on housing issues: *cf.* Delarue *et al.* (2014).

demographic decline observed in these metropolitan areas is not deemed serious enough to require a national public policy as, in France, unlike other countries, it can be attributed in most cities to a migratory deficit, while the natural balance is still currently positive. National actors therefore consider that the response to this demographic decline is to be found instead at local level, by formulating proactive policies to reinforce the attractiveness of the towns and cities in question.

In addition to the lack of recognition of urban shrinkage in France and its persistent absence from the national agenda, certain actors we met were of the view that these limited situations of “degrowth” reflect the effects of monolithic national policies that are blind to local contexts. Indeed, representatives of social landlords’ associations highlighted the highly negative impacts in shrinking territories of policies focused on increasing the housing offer – whether private or social – through new construction (tax-credit policies, policies promoting access to home-ownership, implementation of objectives to make good shortfalls in social housing in accordance with Article 55 of the French urban solidarity and renewal law<sup>6</sup>). In some cases, the resultant new housing offer submerges local markets that do not have the capacity to absorb it, contributing to a devaluation of existing housing stock and aggravating vacancy rates.

Representatives of mayors’ associations pointed out that urban decline is accentuated by policies seeking to “rationalize” public services. Small and medium-sized towns – essential links in the organization and provision of state services – were in the past frequently home to a sub-prefecture, a tax office, law courts, a branch of the Banque de France, a hospital, a police station, etc. Over the last decade, the reorganization of public services has led to the closure of many of these facilities. This withdrawal of the state has in turn led to the departure of many households who contributed to the local dynamics of small and mid-sized towns, and reinforced territorial and social inequalities across France (de Viguerie 2013).

The ongoing decline of certain territories could therefore become a political problem, as it risks fostering a sense of abandonment among the populations concerned. Christophe Guilluy’s analyses concerning “peripheral France” are often cited as illustrations of the risk of support for the far right continuing to grow in shrinking territories if these areas do not soon become the focus of specific public policies. But initiatives seeking to bring the issue of shrinking cities to the fore remain rare and tend to emanate from professional associations and associations of towns, cities and regions rather than from central government.

## **Taking action to get urban shrinkage on to the agenda**

Federations of social landlords (in particular the USH<sup>7</sup> and the FOPH<sup>8</sup>) played a leading role in this still-emerging process of raising awareness of urban shrinkage. Alerted by some of their members to growing difficulties in “low-pressure markets” (increasing vacancy rates, increasing management costs, increasing financial difficulties of social landlords), these professional structures have initiated the production of studies centred on these territories and acted as “agitators” or “whistleblowers”.<sup>9</sup> They have organized various events<sup>10</sup> and carried out lobbying actions to persuade the public authorities to take into account the specific situations of territories in decline. Their objective is to obtain the implementation of actions and, above all, funding for depressed

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<sup>6</sup> French law no. 2000-1208 of 13 December 2000 on urban solidarity and urban renewal, more familiarly known as the “*loi SRU*”; Article 55 concerns the minimum amounts of social housing (as a percentage of total housing stock) for urban and suburban municipalities above a certain population threshold.

<sup>7</sup> USH: Union Social pour l’Habitat, or Social-Housing Union.

<sup>8</sup> FOPH: Fédération des Offices Publics de l’Habitat, or Federation of Public Housing Offices.

<sup>9</sup> In the words of one USH official.

<sup>10</sup> In particular a conference that took place on 23 June 2015 in Le Creusot (an industrial town in southern Burgundy) titled “Territoires en décroissance : quels projets ? Quelles réponses des HLM ?” (“Shrinking territories: what projects? What social-housing responses?”)

areas (e.g. for demolitions in neighbourhoods not covered by ANRU, the National Urban-Renewal Agency).

Associations of elected representatives are also active in the process of getting the issue of cities in decline on to the agenda. The Villes de France association, which represents medium-sized towns, does not take ownership of this politically unattractive term, but does communicate in the press about the difficulties encountered by certain of its members (devitalization of town centres, withdrawal of businesses and services, deterioration of housing, impoverishment of the population). As a key but potentially fragile link in the urban system, medium-sized towns need targeted policies, whereas they feel largely neglected by the action of the state, which is focused on metropolitan areas on the one hand and rural areas on the other. In response, Villes de France has set up an online housing observatory, which emphasizes the diversity of housing problems encountered in medium-sized towns,<sup>11</sup> and in March 2016 organized a seminar on the revitalization of town centres.

The CDC (Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, a public financial institution<sup>12</sup>) supported this event, which echoes its own initiative to encourage the revitalization of the centres of medium-sized towns. With a nationwide presence and links with local actors through its regional directorates, the CDC seems to have realized – sooner than central government has – that certain towns and cities were facing difficulties that they were unable to overcome alone in a context of reduced local financial resources. Accordingly, it provides support for local engineering and financial support for towns that commit to an overarching approach for the revitalization of their centres. In parallel, the CDC is working to adapt its loan offering to more closely match local needs, which now lie less in heavy investment and more in improving and upgrading existing infrastructure.

These actions bear witness to the emergence of urban shrinkage in political debate, albeit in other guises, with a different vocabulary and via correlated problems, and without – as yet – the crux of the issue being put on the political agenda.

### **The anti-decline policies that dare not speak their name: national measures implemented in shrinking cities**

The continuing absence of urban shrinkage from the national agenda should not, however, obscure the existence of action mechanisms which, while not designed to combat urban decline, were mobilized by local actors as part of wider intervention strategies, particularly in the fields of housing and urban planning. This is the case, for example, for the policies implemented by two national agencies: the National Urban-Renewal Programme (Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine, or PNRU) coordinated by ANRU, and the Village-Centre Revitalization (Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs) programme coordinated by the CGET (Commissariat Général à l'Égalité des Territoires – General Commission for Territorial Equality) with the support of the ANAH (Agence Nationale de l'Habitat – National Housing Agency) and the CDC.

Assisting and supporting cities faced with a process of urban shrinkage was not included as a central tenet of the first PNRU. However, those local authorities, social landlords and government departments that were selected as part of the PNRU and affected by urban decline managed to mobilize this national programme as a financial resource and source of expertise to develop policies for the dedensification of public and private housing stock. Funding and engineering provided by ANRU made it possible to demolish social housing where necessary and carry out major restructuring operations in the private housing sector. Recognition of the specificities of cities in low-pressure market contexts has, moreover, grown over time – for example, while one of the key principles of the 2003 PNRU was that every social-housing unit demolished should be replaced

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<sup>11</sup> Website (in French): <http://obshabitatvdf.cohs.info>.

<sup>12</sup> The CDC is defined (in Article L.518-2 of the French Monetary and Financial Code) as “a public group serving the public interest and the economic development of the country” and “a long-term investor”.

with a new-build social-housing unit, ANRU clearly stated in the principles of the “New PNRU” (NPNRU) developed in 2014 that in cities where pressure on housing stock is low, the number of social-housing units constructed may be less than the number of units demolished.

Similarly, while the CGET's national revitalization programme for village centres is not primarily focused on small towns in decline, it is interesting to note that of the 54 settlements selected (following a call for projects in 2014), all faced with devitalization in their centres in terms of housing, businesses and services, 38 had experienced a fall in population between 2008 and 2013. Finally, local authorities wishing to implement dedensification policies within their stocks of old private housing can use funds already allocated by the ANAH to operations in place to eliminate substandard housing and restore buildings containing highly deteriorated housing.

Finally, in parallel with the publication, in October 2016, of a report by the IGF (Inspection Générale des Finances – Inspectorate General of Finance) and the CGEDD (Conseil Général de l'Environnement et du Développement Durable – General Council for the Environment and Sustainable Development), which highlights the aggravation of business vacancy rates in the centres of medium-sized towns, the CGET began a process of reflection with a view to implementing a policy dedicated to the revitalization of these kinds of towns. Once again, shrinking towns and cities are not explicitly targeted (and the medium-sized towns with the highest vacancy rates are not necessarily shrinking, as the example of Béziers in southern France shows); but, as in the case of the Village Centres programme, it can be assumed that these towns will be able to take advantage of the mechanisms created to revitalize their centres.

### **Thinking about anti-decline strategies in terms other than a return to growth: baby steps**

Finally, the interviews conducted at central-government level highlight the state's difficulties in imagining strategies for cities in decline that involve approaches other than a return to growth. While these respondents know that decline in these cities is likely to persist, as it is a result of complex structural processes (the effects of metropolization on small towns, the ageing of the population, the weakness of regulatory tools available at intermunicipal level, etc.), the return of growth remains the ultimate goal of intervention strategies that in general merely recycle measures implemented in other kinds of territories: developing an attractive housing offer for higher socio-economic categories, developing business parks to attract new companies, and so forth. And yet, ironically, this very goal acts as an obstacle to identifying the specificities of the process of urban decline; lip service is sometimes paid to “urban easing” strategies, such as the demolition of the most stigmatized social housing, the dedensification of old neighbourhoods and the creation of land reserves, but action aimed at improving the living conditions of residents in a context of decline is absent from local and national political agendas. By focusing on the sole objective of making areas attractive again (Miot 2016), thinking on the subject of decline ultimately pays little attention to the populations already present and does not envisage the opportunities that could be generated by this very particular demographic context.

This observation – that urban engineering capabilities are still largely undeveloped as far as urban decline is concerned – leads to the following question: is it the state's responsibility to remedy these shortcomings? No clear answer emerged from our interviews. Some, notably within central-government departments, were of the view that, 30 years after France's decentralization laws were passed, it is no longer the state's role to stand in for local authorities, and it is up to these authorities to develop the necessary skills and resources to construct policies adapted to their problems. Indeed, this view is one that may well be shared by certain representatives of local-government associations, who underscore (and deplore) the disappearance of engineering capabilities within the regional and subregional departments responsible for implementing state services. Other actors, while harbouring no desire to return to the highly centralized development policies of the “*Trente Glorieuses*” (France's 30 post-war boom years up to 1975), consider that the local engineering deficit in cities in decline requires special support from the national agencies and state departments

responsible for these territories. They also believe that, at the very least, national housing policies should make greater efforts to take into consideration the specificities of these areas, whether in terms of the fiscal tools they makes available or in terms of the action programmes they implement.

Despite recent indications that greater attention is gradually being paid to the devitalization of town and village centres, it is clear that central government in France still largely ignores cities facing urban shrinkage: undeniably, its efforts have focused to date on supporting the development of the largest metropolitan areas. But we should also question whether the state is solely responsible for this lack of recognition of urban shrinkage in France – after all, have local actors always taken the necessary steps to publicize situations of urban shrinkage?

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