DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL SHRINKAGE – FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RURAL AREAS IN GERMANY

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1. Introduction: Demography and Rural Areas in Germany

European research on regional development in the last two decades has emphasized the decrease in spatial disparities between states, but attention has also been drawn to the increase in disparities at the intra-state regional level (Mau 2004). Also discussed intensively for many years have been the consequences of demographic change at the regional level, where it is possible to observe a close relationship between demographic change and spatial disparities. On the one hand, spatial disparities affect the paths of migration, particularly young people migrating to regions that offer better living and working conditions, as well as life expectancy levels. On the other hand, demographic change reinforces spatial disparities in infrastructure, community capacity and economic development.

The entire German post-war period has seen and was influenced by different patterns of regional migration. During and directly after the Second World War the population in German cities decreased. The 1950/1960s saw a huge number of people migrating to strong industrial districts, a period of growth that was based on the “use up” of traditional sectors in the economy and society through capitalism (Lutz 1984). In the 1970/1980s period of high-level welfare, homeownership and suburbanization were promoted – alongside automobilization and the functional change of city centres. And since the beginning of the 1990s, new patterns of mobility have emerged, based on international migration, net internal migration between eastern and western Germany, as well as globalization and specific consumption habits (like different youth cultures and ecological lifestyles). These migration patterns correspond strongly to the situation within the labour markets of the different regions and, until today, have decisively effected spatial developments more than any other factor of demographic change (including lower fertility rates and increased life expectancy). Intensified net outmigration from what was formerly East Germany
has long concealed the decrease in birth rates in western Germany, whereas in reality the number of immigrants is falling in many regions. In 2005, only 14 per cent of counties and 10 per cent of urban districts recorded more births than deaths, while 39 per cent of counties and 34 per cent of urban districts recorded immigration exceeding outmigration by 3 per cent or more, compared to 84 per cent of counties and 31 per cent of urban districts in 1995 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2007). Responsible for this development are the decrease in international immigration, the decline in the number of cohorts with high birth rates in East Germany and the so-called “urban renaissance” (Läpple 2004). The number of regions that face demographic shrinkage will rise in the near future, and it is probable that this phenomenon will not be restricted to so-called weak regions only. Actually, severe demographic competition concerning the most attractive living and working conditions can be observed already today.

Spatial differences in demographic ageing are comparatively small in Germany, when compared to Japan for example. In a regional focus, however, we can discern large ‘older’ areas, such as the Ruhrgebiet, Saarland, Eifel, Südniedersachsen, Harzvorland, Lausitz, Erzgebirge and Frankenwald, and even between communities or neighbourhoods large variations in the demographic age structure and the process of ageing do occur. The demographic development of German rural areas can be subdivided into the following categories or phases:

(1) The *demography of modernization* was accompanied by the growth of urban agglomerations in the period of industrialization and centralization, as well as the decrease in birth rates and the increase in life expectancy. The rural-urban relationship was strongly affected by urbanization.

(2) The *demography of ruralization* has accompanied the change from an agricultural to a rural society with a new understanding of living and working conditions in rural areas. The population and employment rates in rural areas increased, while the rural-urban relationship was shaped by sub- and counter-urbanization.

(3) The *demography of transformation* refers to the specific change in eastern Germany after the collapse of the political, institutional and economic systems of the former GDR; that is, the adaptation to the systems of western Germany. This process entailed a sharp decline in birth rates paired with high outmigration rates in urban and rural areas.