

**Rural futures for young adults**

**Rural development and regeneration in the Netherlands**

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# Rural futures for young adults

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Rural development and  
regeneration in the Netherlands

**Maarten Koreman**



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**24#07**

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# Rural futures for young adults

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## Rural development and regeneration in the Netherlands

Dissertation

for the purpose of obtaining the degree of doctor  
at Delft University of Technology  
by the authority of the Rector Magnificus, prof.dr.ir. T.H.J.J. van der Hagen  
chair of the Board for Doctorates  
to be defended publicly on  
Friday 12 April, 2023 at 12.30 o'clock

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# Summary

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Over the past decades, rural municipalities in Europe have been changing. While the population of urban municipalities is increasing, the population of rural municipalities is decreasing and ageing. Especially young adults are moving from rural towards urban municipalities. However, these young adults are essential in creating rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. The roles of communities and governance in rural municipalities in Europe have also changed during the past decades. The responsibilities for rural development have decentralised to lower levels of government, communities, and individuals. Meanwhile, the economic development of European rural municipalities shows continued farm enlargement and a trend towards a more diversified rural economy, with fewer people working in agriculture. Regarding all these changes, it is important to understand what young adults want to do and can do to support rural development and regeneration.

This dissertation uses the Netherlands as a case study to investigate the future of young adults in rural municipalities. Demographically, the Netherlands is strongly urbanized and densely populated. Inhabitants of urban municipalities are relatively younger than inhabitants of rural municipalities, where more population decline is expected. Meanwhile, decentralisation is the leading governmental development in the Netherlands. In response to their increased number of tasks, many small, rural municipalities in the Netherlands have been amalgamated into more urban municipalities or have been merged. Therefore, rural municipalities in the Netherlands can sometimes be considered rural regions. Like the European level, the economic structure of rural municipalities in the Netherlands will continue to go through a quick transition, invoking discussion on rural economic planning and how to use scarce land. The economic restructuring of the countryside and the decentralisation of governmental tasks in the Netherlands may also relate to its rural political geography. Electoral results show increased political discontent among inhabitants of rural municipalities in the Netherlands. This context leads to questions on future opportunities for young adults in these places.

## **Research aim and questions**

Against this background, the primary aim of this dissertation is to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands, explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities and understand this in the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands.

This research aim is operationalised in the following research questions: 1) What are the dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles in realising these dreams of young adults from urban and rural municipalities in the Netherlands, and how do these foreseen obstacles impact their life plans? 2) How can the organisation of cultural festivals support rural development and regeneration in a rural municipality in the Netherlands? 3) To what extent can the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings support rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities in the Netherlands? And 4) to what extent is urban political overrepresentation constraining rural development and regeneration?

## **Research methods and findings**

The research questions were investigated through different methods. In what follows, the methods used and the findings per research question are presented.

Chapter 2 answers research question 1 and aims to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands, focusing on the research theme of rural demography. It explores the dreams for the future of young adults living in the regions of Midden-Noord-Brabant and Zeeland, the obstacles they foresee in realising these dreams, and how these obstacles influence their stated life plans. This is done through 274 qualitative surveys and focus groups with 12 participants. The chapter shows that in fifteen years, most survey respondents dream of residing within or relatively close to their current place of residence. Rural areas, especially those close to a city, are also popular in the residential dreams for the future. The lifestyle dreams for the future of young adults are often connected to their residential dreams. Access to leisure activities, family and friends are frequently mentioned. This also shows the importance of community relations, especially in rural municipalities. The career dreams of the survey respondents vary but tend to be more urban-oriented than their residential dreams. Respondents with a rural residential dream foresee a lack of available housing as the most critical obstacle to realising their dream for the future. The lack of career opportunities is also mentioned regularly but less often. The foreseen obstacles in realising the dreams for the future also influence the stated life plans of young adults who participate in the focus groups.

Participants with a rural residential and urban career dream will likely let their career dream prevail over their residential dream. Furthermore, respondents explain that the lack of available housing and career opportunities in rural municipalities makes them develop more urban-oriented life plans. Hence, the dreams for the future of young adults reveal a severe potential for demographic growth in rural municipalities in the Netherlands, provided that the foreseen obstacles are taken away.

Chapter 3 answers research question 2 and explores opportunities for rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities, focusing on the research theme of rural communities and governance. It analyses the role of cultural festivals in the rural municipality of Oldambt. This is done through 19 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders around the Oldambt festivals and local youth. The chapter shows that from the perspective of the interviewed stakeholders, the organisation of such festivals contributes to the regeneration of the municipality. The festivals are locally legitimised through the support of local citizens, who value the cultural impulse in their residential environment. The festivals are rooted in local political, human and economic capital. The community-led festivals are especially strong in this local rootedness. The festivals also enhance the local cultural capital of Oldambt and bring economic benefits. They help establish valuable networks that stretch within and outside of the municipality. This supports reinventing Oldambt and improving its image, thus regenerating the municipality that experienced a period of decline. Most support for regeneration is found in the community-led festivals of Hongerige Wolf and Waterbei and the private-led festival of Grasnapsky. The public-led festival of Pura Vida also supports regeneration, albeit to a lesser extent. Given the critical role of local capital and communities, it is not given that the organisation of cultural festivals will also support rural regeneration elsewhere. This depends on the role of local communities and the ability of policymakers to support them. Therefore, cultural festivals can support rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities, but only in a favourable local context.

Chapter 4 answers research question 3 and explores rural development and regeneration opportunities in rural municipalities, focusing on the rural economic planning research theme. It studies the contribution of the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings to rural development by analysing two cases in the rural municipalities of Boekel and Raalte. This is done through document analysis and 23 semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders. The chapter shows that commercially re-using vacant farm buildings supports rural development, albeit to a limited extent. The investigated cases attract new entrepreneurs, jobs and liveliness to rural municipalities. Local communities are enthused, mainly because of the involvement of a local entrepreneur, a focus on architectural quality and the alignment of the plans with local policy ambitions. The studied cases of commercial

re-use of vacant farm buildings also help attract and retain young adults for the towns of Boekel and Raalte. In planning terms, the increasing surplus of vacant farm buildings is problematic. Commercial re-use alone cannot solve this issue as the demand is too limited. In less ideal cases than those studied in Chapter 4, the adverse effects of commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings may outweigh the positive effects. This also generates a discussion on the ability of current planning systems to deal with the ongoing complex rural transformation processes. As local governments still tend to avoid spatial mixed-use, they may miss opportunities for commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings that support rural development.

Chapter 5 answers research question 4 and aims to understand the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands, focusing on the rural political geography research theme. It analyses urban political overrepresentation in the Netherlands and the access to public funding for municipalities with different degrees of urbanization. This is done through descriptive statistics on the municipality of residence of national politicians and on the proportionate division of region deal funding, as well as document analysis on the access to funding from the national government for municipalities in different degrees of urbanization. The chapter shows that urban political overrepresentation helps to create political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants. Extremely urbanized municipalities have been overrepresented in the places of residence of national politicians in 2017. In the following years, these municipalities have had more and easier access to public funding than other municipalities in the Netherlands. Despite claims that the investment programme is not focused on them, extremely urbanized municipalities even receive relatively much money from the region deals. Although Chapter 5 does not show the exact extent, it shows that urban political overrepresentation provides political benefits to extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants. The national government's focus on these municipalities hampers development opportunities in other municipalities. Therefore, urban political overrepresentation constrains rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities in the Netherlands and may explain why they struggle to achieve governmental attention and funding. This lack of attention and funding can explain the political discontent among the inhabitants of such municipalities.

Together, the findings of this dissertation have helped to achieve its primary aim, leading to the conclusion (Chapter 6.1). The dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands can be understood as showing a somewhat unexpected interest in residing and, to a lesser extent, working in rural municipalities. The life plans of these young adults become more urban-oriented because they foresee a lack of housing availability and, to a lesser extent, a lack of career opportunities in rural municipalities. (Chapter 2).

Such career opportunities can be created through rural development and regeneration (Chapter 6.1). Therefore, this dissertation has explored rural cultural festivals and commercially re-used vacant farm buildings and their contribution to supporting rural development and regeneration and attracting young adults to rural municipalities. Cultural festivals that are community-led or otherwise connected to the local community can regenerate a rural municipality. These festivals create economic benefits and help to reinvent an area. Despite only offering limited career opportunities, the achieved rural regeneration makes a rural municipality more attractive for young adults (Chapter 3). Commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings forms another opportunity for rural development in rural municipalities. It creates career opportunities and liveliness in deteriorating places. Involving local entrepreneurs and policymakers is critical to successful commercial re-use (Chapter 4).

However, to enable dreams for the future and create a broader impact with the explored opportunities, the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands also bears relevance (Chapter 6.1). Urban political overrepresentation coincides with political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands (Chapter 5). This situation may hamper rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. It may explain why the lack of housing availability and career opportunities in such municipalities has not yet been tackled (Chapter 2). Urban political overrepresentation may also explain the limited financial support from the national government for the cultural sector outside of the extremely urbanized municipalities (Chapter 3). The need for more attention to the vacant farm buildings issue and the slow progress in creating a spatial planning system that fits the ongoing rural transformation (Chapter 4) may also be related to urban political overrepresentation.

Across this dissertation, support can be found for the critical role of local communities in creating future opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands (Chapter 6.1). Embeddedness in the community makes rural municipalities attractive places of residence in dreams for the future of young adults (Chapter 2), helps cultural festivals to make more impact (Chapter 3) and supports successful commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings (Chapter 4). A lack of understanding among national politicians on the needs of and opportunities for people who work and live in rural municipalities may make it harder to address these needs and create these opportunities. Therefore, the future of young adults in rural municipalities relies on two developments: 1) The ability of young adults in rural municipalities to use community resources to support rural development and regeneration and 2) the role of policymakers in supporting these efforts.

## Scholarly implications

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The findings of this dissertation have scholarly implications for research into the future of young adults in rural municipalities and opportunities for rural development and regeneration. These are presented here.

This dissertation addresses the research theme of rural demography and the debate on future migration patterns. It shows that rural municipalities are more popular among young adults in the Netherlands than expected. This suggests the value of another approach towards the demographic potential of rural regions. Foreseen obstacles make rural residential dreams hard to achieve. The lack of available housing is the most foreseen obstacle for young adults. In studying future migration patterns, this dissertation shows the relevance of a micro-level focus on dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles and stated life plans.

The debate on exogenous versus endogenous rural development relates to the research themes of rural communities and governance and rural economic planning. The results in Chapter 3 support the community-led neo-endogenous development approach and extend knowledge of how rural festivals and rural regeneration may be understood in the exogenous/endogenous debate. The results in Chapter 4 support the exogenous/endogenous approach to rural development.

This dissertation relates to the rural economic planning research theme by engaging in the debate on productivism, post-productivism and neo-productivism. Chapter 4 shows the value of a cooperative neo-productivist approach to rural development. The dissertation explicitly focuses on opportunities for young adults in neo-productivist approaches to rural development. In the studied cases of commercially re-used vacant farm buildings, young entrepreneurs settle their business in a rural community.

Within the field of rural political geography, this research engages with the debate on spatial justice for rural regions. Chapter 5 shows the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands and how these municipalities have political benefits that do not apply to other municipalities. These findings link the established literature on political overrepresentation and its budgetary consequences to the emerging literature on rural political discontent.

## **Implications for policy and society**

Next to scholarly implications, this dissertation also has implications for people who are involved with the future of young adults in rural municipalities and opportunities for rural development and regeneration. In what follows, these implications for policy and society are presented.

The findings of this dissertation support cooperative neo-productivist, exogenous/ endogenous and community-led neo-endogenous approaches to rural development and regeneration. This also has implications for policymakers, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], citizens and communities who seek to enhance opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities. Policymakers on all levels of government may critically reflect on their role in rural communities. Policymakers may focus more on supporting existing bottom-up initiatives and enable entrepreneurs, NGOs, citizens and communities to create rural development and regeneration. This also requires a structural improvement of the political situation of rural municipalities and their inhabitants. To achieve this, the voices of rural communities may be adopted into policies.

On the European level, The CAP may focus more on rural development and regeneration. It would be better if policymakers at the European level enhanced local capital and the connectivity of rural regions. On the national level, policymakers may reconsider the trends towards densification, the concentration of public employment and the unequally divided cultural budgets. These are currently disincentivising rural development and regeneration. National politicians bear responsibility for the unfavourable context in which rural municipalities and their inhabitants operate. Once elected, national politicians may support underrepresented rural municipalities and their inhabitants and address their concerns. At the regional and local level, the residential dreams for the future of young adults may deserve more attention. Rural municipalities' structurally unfavourable political position in the Netherlands requires them to seek opportunities to make themselves more heard and relevant nationally. They may also reconsider planning visions that object to the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. The importance of own initiative also applies to citizens, entrepreneurs, NGOs and communities in rural municipalities. To tackle their issues, they have to create awareness among policymakers on all governmental levels.

This dissertation contributes to knowledge about future opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities. This knowledge can be used by young adults, policymakers, scholars, and other people involved. It can inform their efforts to create a spatially just society where young adults who dream of residing and working in a rural municipality can realise this dream.



# Samenvatting

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In de afgelopen decennia zijn rurale gemeenten in Europa aan verandering onderhevig geweest. Terwijl de bevolking in stedelijke gemeenten groeit, neemt die af en vergrijsd in rurale gemeenten. Vooral jongvolwassenen trekken van rurale naar stedelijke gemeenten. Desalniettemin zijn deze jongvolwassenen essentieel voor het creëren van plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie in rurale gemeenten. De rollen van gemeenschappen en bestuur in rurale gemeenten in Europa zijn ook veranderd in de afgelopen decennia. Beleidsverantwoordelijkheden zijn gedecentraliseerd naar lagere overheden, gemeenschappen en individuen. Ondertussen kenmerkt de economische ontwikkeling van Europese rurale gemeenten zich door schaalvergroting in de landbouw zien en een meer gediversifieerde plattelandseconomie, met minder mensen die in de landbouw werken. Gezien al deze veranderingen is het belangrijk om te begrijpen wat jongvolwassenen willen en kunnen doen om plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie te ondersteunen.

Deze dissertatie gebruikt Nederland als een casestudy om de toekomst van jongvolwassenen in rurale gemeenten te onderzoeken. Demografisch gezien is Nederland sterk verstedelijkt en dichtbevolkt. Bewoners van stedelijke gemeenten zijn gemiddeld jonger dan bewoners van rurale gemeenten, waar meer bevolkingsafname wordt verwacht. Tegelijkertijd is decentralisatie de belangrijkste bestuurlijke ontwikkeling in Nederland. Vanwege hun toegenomen verantwoordelijkheden zijn veel kleine en rurale gemeenten in Nederland onderdeel geworden van meer stedelijke gemeenten of gefuseerd. Door hun toegenomen grootte kunnen rurale gemeenten in Nederland soms zelfs als rurale regio's worden beschouwd. Net als op Europees niveau zal de economische structuur van rurale gemeenten in Nederland blijven veranderen, wat discussie oproept over rurale economische planning en het gebruik van schaars land. De economische herstructurering van het platteland en de decentralisatie van bestuurlijke taken in Nederland kunnen ook verband houden met de rurale politieke geografie. Verkiezingsresultaten tonen een toegenomen politieke ontevredenheid onder inwoners van rurale gemeenten in Nederland. Deze context roept vragen op over toekomstige kansen voor jongvolwassenen in deze gemeenten.

## Onderzoeksdoel en -vragen

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Gegeven deze achtergrond is het primaire doel van deze dissertatie om de toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen in Nederland te begrijpen, kansen te verkennen voor het creëren van plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie in rurale gemeenten, en dit te begrijpen in de politieke context van rurale gemeenten in Nederland.

Dit onderzoeksdoel is geoperationaliseerd in de volgende onderzoeksvragen: 1) Wat zijn de dromen voor de toekomst en voorziene obstakels bij het realiseren van deze dromen van jongvolwassenen uit stedelijke en rurale gemeenten in Nederland, en hoe beïnvloeden deze voorziene obstakels hun levensplannen? 2) Hoe kan de organisatie van culturele festivals plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie ondersteunen in een rurale gemeente in Nederland? 3) In hoeverre kan de commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie in rurale gemeenten in Nederland ondersteunen? En 4) In hoeverre wordt plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie belemmert door stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging?

## Onderzoeksmethoden en bevindingen

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Deze dissertatie maakt gebruik van verschillende onderzoeksmethoden. In wat volgt, wordt per onderzoeksvraag toegelicht van welke onderzoeksmethode gebruik is gemaakt en tot welk resultaat dit heeft geleid.

Hoofdstuk 2 beantwoordt onderzoeksvraag 1 en heeft als doel de dromen voor de toekomst van jongvolwassenen in Nederland te begrijpen, waarbij het zich focust op het onderzoeksthema plattelandsdemografie. Hoofdstuk 2 onderzoekt de toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen die wonen in de regio's Midden-Noord-Brabant en Zeeland, de obstakels die ze voorzien bij het realiseren van deze dromen, en hoe deze obstakels hun levensplannen beïnvloeden. Dit wordt gedaan aan de hand van 274 kwalitatieve enquêtes en focusgroepen met 12 deelnemers. Het hoofdstuk toont aan dat de meeste respondenten over vijftien jaar dromen van het wonen in of relatief dicht bij hun huidige woonplaats. Landelijke gebieden, vooral dicht bij de stad gelegen, zijn ook populair in de woondromen voor de toekomst. De toekomstige levensstijldromen van jongvolwassenen zijn vaak verbonden met hun woondromen. Toegang tot recreatieve activiteiten, familie en vrienden worden vaak genoemd. Dit toont ook het belang van gemeenschapsrelaties aan, vooral in rurale gemeenten. De carrière-dromen van de enquêterespondenten variëren, maar neigen meer naar een stedelijke oriëntatie dan hun woondromen. Respondenten met een rurale woondroom voorzien een gebrek aan beschikbare huisvesting als het meest kritieke obstakel om hun deze droom te realiseren. Het gebrek aan carrièremogelijkheden wordt ook

regelmatig genoemd, maar minder vaak. De voorziene obstakels bij het realiseren van de toekomstdromen beïnvloeden ook de levensplannen van de jongvolwassenen focusgroepdeelnemers. Deelnemers met een rurale woondroom en stedelijke carrière-droom zullen waarschijnlijk hun carrière-droom laten prevaleren. Deelnemers leggen ook uit dat het gebrek aan beschikbare huisvesting en carrière-mogelijkheden in rurale gemeenten hen noopt tot het ontwikkelen van meer stedelijk georiënteerde levensplannen. De toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen tonen dus de potentie voor demografische groei in rurale gemeenten in Nederland, mits de voorziene obstakels worden weggenomen.

Hoofdstuk 3 beantwoordt onderzoeksvraag 2 en verkent mogelijkheden voor plattelandsontwikkeling en regeneratie in rurale gemeenten, met de focus op het onderzoeksthema rurale gemeenschappen en bestuur. Het hoofdstuk analyseert de rol van culturele festivals in de rurale gemeente Oldambt. Dit gebeurt aan de hand van 19 semi-gestructureerde interviews met stakeholders rond de festivals in Oldambt en lokale jongeren. Het hoofdstuk toont aan dat volgens de geïnterviewde belanghebbenden de organisatie van dergelijke festivals bijdraagt aan de regeneratie van de gemeente. De festivals worden lokaal gelegitimeerd door de steun van burgers, die de culturele impuls in hun woonomgeving waarderen. De festivals zijn geworteld in lokaal politiek, menselijk en economisch kapitaal. De door de gemeenschap georganiseerde festivals zijn vooral sterk in deze lokale verankering. De festivals versterken ook het lokale culturele kapitaal van Oldambt en brengen economische voordelen met zich mee. Ze helpen waardevolle netwerken op te bouwen, zowel binnen als buiten de gemeente. Dit ondersteunt de heruitvinding van Oldambt en verbetert het imago, waardoor de gemeente wordt geregenereerd na een periode van achteruitgang. De meeste steun voor plattelandsregeneratie wordt gevonden in de door de gemeenschap georganiseerde festivals van Hongerige Wolf en Waterbei en het door particulieren georganiseerde festival van Grasnapsky. Het door de overheid georganiseerde festival van Pura Vida ondersteunt de plattelandsregeneratie in iets mindere mate. Door de cruciale rol van lokaal kapitaal en gemeenschappen is het niet vanzelfsprekend dat de organisatie van culturele festivals ook elders plattelandsregeneratie zal ondersteunen. Dit hangt af van de rol van lokale gemeenschappen en de mogelijkheid van beleidsmakers om hen te ondersteunen. Culturele festivals kunnen dus plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie in rurale gemeenten ondersteunen, maar alleen in een gunstige lokale context.

Hoofdstuk 4 beantwoordt onderzoeksvraag 3 en verkent mogelijkheden voor plattelandsontwikkeling en regeneratie in rurale gemeenten, met de focus op het onderzoeksthema rurale economische planologie. Het hoofdstuk bestudeert de bijdrage van de commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen aan plattelandsontwikkeling door twee gevallen te analyseren in de rurale gemeenten

Boekel en Raalte. Dit gebeurt via documentanalyse en 23 semi-gestructureerde interviews met relevante stakeholders. Het hoofdstuk toont aan dat commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen plattelandsontwikkeling ondersteunt, zij het in beperkte mate. De onderzochte gevallen trekken nieuwe ondernemers, banen en levendigheid aan in rurale gemeenten. Lokale gemeenschappen zijn enthousiast, vooral vanwege de betrokkenheid van een lokale ondernemer, de focus op architectonische kwaliteit en de afstemming van de plannen op lokale beleidsambities. De bestudeerde gevallen van commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen helpen ook om jongvolwassenen aan te trekken en te behouden voor Boekel en Raalte. Planologisch gezien is de toenemende overmaat aan leegstaande stallen problematisch. Commerciële herbestemming alleen kan dit probleem niet oplossen, omdat de vraag te beperkt is. In minder ideale gevallen dan die bestudeerd in hoofdstuk 4 kunnen de nadelige effecten van commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen opwegen tegen de positieve effecten. Dit vraagt ook om een discussie in hoeverre huidige planningsystemen om kunnen gaan met de voortdurende complexe transformatieprocessen op het platteland. Omdat lokale overheden nog steeds geneigd zijn ruimtelijk gemengd gebruik te vermijden, kunnen ze kansen missen voor commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen die plattelandsontwikkeling ondersteunen.

Hoofdstuk 5 beantwoordt onderzoeksvraag 4 en heeft tot doel de politieke context van rurale gemeenten in Nederland te begrijpen, met de focus op het onderzoeksthema rurale politieke geografie. Het hoofdstuk analyseert stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging in Nederland en de toegang tot publieke financiering voor gemeenten met verschillende graden van verstedelijking. Dit gebeurt via beschrijvende statistiek over de woongemeente van nationale politici en over de proportionele verdeling van regiodealfinanciering. Daarnaast worden documenten geanalyseerd over de toegang tot Rijksfinanciering voor gemeenten in verschillende stedelijkheidsgraden. Hoofdstuk 5 toont aan dat stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging helpt bij het creëren van politieke voordelen voor zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten en hun inwoners. In 2017 waren zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten oververtegenwoordigd in de woonplaatsen van nationale politici. In de daaropvolgende jaren hadden deze gemeenten meer en gemakkelijker toegang tot publieke financiering dan andere gemeenten in Nederland. Ondanks beweringen dat het investeringsprogramma niet op hen gericht is, ontvangen zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten zelfs relatief veel geld uit de regiodeals. Hoofdstuk 5 toont niet de exacte omvang aan, maar laat zien dat stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging politieke voordelen biedt aan zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten en hun inwoners. De focus van de nationale overheid op deze gemeenten belemmert ontwikkelingsmogelijkheden in andere gemeenten. Daarom belemmert stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging plattelandsontwikkeling en regeneratie in rurale gemeenten in Nederland en kan

verklaren waarom ze moeite hebben om overheidsaandacht en financiering te verkrijgen. Dit gebrek aan aandacht en financiering kan de politieke ontevredenheid onder de inwoners van dergelijke gemeenten verklaren.

De bevindingen van deze dissertatie zorgen er gezamenlijk voor dat het primaire onderzoeksdoel wordt bereikt, wat leidt tot de conclusie (Hoofdstuk 6.1). Enigszins onverwachts, wijzen de toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen op een interesse in het wonen en, in mindere mate, werken in rurale gemeenten. Omdat deze jongvolwassenen een gebrek aan beschikbare huisvesting en, in mindere mate, een gebrek aan carrièremogelijkheden in rurale gemeenten voorzien, worden hun levensplannen meer stedelijk georiënteerd (Hoofdstuk 2).

Dergelijke carrièremogelijkheden kunnen worden gecreëerd door plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie (Hoofdstuk 6.1). Daarom heeft deze dissertatie onderzocht hoe rurale, culturele festivals en commercieel hergebruik van leegstaande stallen bijdragen aan het ondersteunen van plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie en het aantrekken van jongvolwassenen naar rurale gemeenten. Culturele festivals die door de gemeenschap worden geleid of anderszins verbonden zijn met de lokale gemeenschap kunnen een landelijke gemeente regenereren. Deze festivals creëren economische voordelen en helpen een gebied opnieuw uit te vinden. Ondanks dat ze slechts beperkte carrièremogelijkheden bieden, maakt de bereikte plattelandsregeneratie een rurale gemeente aantrekkelijker voor jongvolwassenen (Hoofdstuk 3). Commercieel hergebruik van leegstaande stallen vormt een andere kans voor plattelandsontwikkeling in rurale gemeenten. Het creëert carrièremogelijkheden en levendigheid op plekken die aan het vervallen zijn. Betrokkenheid van lokale ondernemers en beleidsmakers is cruciaal voor succesvol commercieel hergebruik (Hoofdstuk 4).

Om dromen voor de toekomst mogelijk te maken en een bredere impact te creëren met de onderzochte mogelijkheden, is de politieke context van rurale gemeenten in Nederland ook relevant (Hoofdstuk 6.1). Stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging valt samen met politieke voordelen voor zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten in Nederland (Hoofdstuk 5). Deze situatie kan plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie in rurale gemeenten belemmeren. Het kan verklaren waarom het gebrek aan beschikbare huisvesting en carrièremogelijkheden in dergelijke gemeenten nog niet is aangepakt (Hoofdstuk 2). Stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging kan ook de beperkte financiële steun van de nationale overheid verklaren voor de culturele sector buiten de zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten (Hoofdstuk 3). De noodzaak van meer aandacht voor het probleem van leegstaande stallen en de trage vooruitgang bij het creëren van een planningsstelsel dat past bij de voortdurende plattelandstransformatie (Hoofdstuk 4) kan ook gerelateerd zijn aan stedelijke politieke oververtegenwoordiging.

In deze hele dissertatie is ondersteuning te vinden voor de cruciale rol van lokale gemeenschappen bij het creëren van toekomstige kansen voor jongvolwassenen in rurale gemeenten in Nederland (Hoofdstuk 6.1). Inbedding in de gemeenschap maakt landelijke gemeenten aantrekkelijke plaatsen om te wonen in de toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen (Hoofdstuk 2), helpt culturele festivals om meer impact te hebben (Hoofdstuk 3) en ondersteunt succesvol commercieel hergebruik van leegstaande stallen (Hoofdstuk 4). Een gebrek aan begrip bij nationale politici over de behoeften en mogelijkheden van mensen die in rurale gemeenten werken en wonen, kan het moeilijker maken om deze behoeften aan te pakken en deze kansen te creëren. Daarom berust de toekomst van jongvolwassenen in landelijke gemeenten op twee ontwikkelingen: 1) Hun eigen vermogen om de kracht van de gemeenschap te gebruiken voor plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie en 2) de rol van beleidsmakers bij het ondersteunen van deze inspanningen.

## **Wetenschappelijke implicaties**

De bevindingen van deze dissertatie hebben wetenschappelijke implicaties voor onderzoek naar de toekomst van jongvolwassenen in rurale gemeenten en mogelijkheden voor plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie. Deze worden hier gepresenteerd.

Deze dissertatie behandelt het onderzoeksthema rurale demografie en het debat over toekomstige migratiepatronen. Het toont aan dat onder jongvolwassenen in Nederland rurale gemeenten populairder zijn dan verwacht. Het demografische potentieel van plattelandsgebieden kan dus anders worden benaderd. Voorziene obstakels maken het moeilijk om rurale woondromen te verwezenlijken, waarbij een gebrek aan beschikbare huisvesting het meest voorziene obstakel is voor jongvolwassenen. Bij het bestuderen van toekomstige migratiepatronen toont deze dissertatie de relevantie aan van een micro-niveau focus op toekomstdromen, voorziene obstakels en levensplannen.

Het debat over exogene versus endogene plattelandsontwikkeling heeft betrekking op de onderzoeksthema's rurale gemeenschappen en bestuur en rurale economische planologie. De resultaten in Hoofdstuk 3 ondersteunen de door de gemeenschap geleide neo-endogene ontwikkelingsbenadering en breiden de kennis uit over hoe plattelandsfestivals en plattelandsregeneratie begrepen kunnen worden in het exogene/endogene debat. De resultaten in Hoofdstuk 4 ondersteunen de exogene/endogene benadering van plattelandsontwikkeling.

Deze dissertatie heeft ook betrekking op het onderzoeksthema van rurale economische planologie, door deel te nemen aan het debat over productivisme, post-productivisme en neo-productivisme. Hoofdstuk 4 toont de waarde aan van een coöperatieve neo-productivistische benadering van plattelandsontwikkeling. De dissertatie richt zich expliciet op kansen voor jongvolwassenen in neo-productivistische benaderingen van plattelandsontwikkeling. In de bestudeerde gevallen van commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen vestigen jonge ondernemers hun bedrijf in een rurale gemeenschap.

Binnen het vakgebied van rurale politieke geografie gaat dit onderzoek in op het debat over ruimtelijke rechtvaardigheid voor rurale regio's. Hoofdstuk 5 laat de politieke oververtegenwoordiging zien van zeer sterk stedelijke gemeenten in Nederland en hoe deze gemeenten politieke voordelen hebben die niet van toepassing zijn op andere gemeenten. Deze bevindingen verbinden de gevestigde literatuur over politieke oververtegenwoordiging en de budgettaire gevolgen ervan met de opkomende literatuur over politieke ontevredenheid op het platteland.

## **Implicaties voor beleid en samenleving**

Naast wetenschappelijke implicaties heeft deze dissertatie ook gevolgen voor mensen die betrokken zijn bij de toekomst van jongvolwassenen in rurale gemeenten en mogelijkheden voor plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie. Dit leidt tot de volgende implicaties voor beleid en samenleving:

De bevindingen van deze dissertatie ondersteunen coöperatieve neo-productivistische, exogene/endogene en door de gemeenschap geleide neo-endogene benaderingen van plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie. Dit heeft ook gevolgen voor beleidsmakers, ondernemers, niet-gouvernementele organisaties (NGO's), burgers en gemeenschappen die kansen voor jongvolwassenen in rurale gemeenten willen verbeteren. Beleidsmakers op alle overheidsniveaus dienen kritisch te reflecteren op hun rol in rurale gemeenschappen. Beleidsmakers kunnen zich meer richten op het ondersteunen van bestaande bottom-up-initiatieven en ondernemers, NGO's, burgers en gemeenschappen in staat stellen plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie te creëren. Dit vereist ook een structurele verbetering van de politieke situatie van rurale gemeenten en hun inwoners. Om dit te bereiken, zouden de ideeën vanuit plattelandsgemeenschappen beter kunnen worden meegenomen in het beleid.

Op Europees niveau zou het Gemeenschappelijk Landbouwbeleid (GLB) zich meer kunnen richten op plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie. Europese beleidskamkers kunnen het lokale kapitaal en de connectiviteit van plattelandsgebieden verbeteren.

Op nationaal niveau kunnen beleidsmakers de trends van verdichting, concentratie van publieke werkgelegenheid en ongelijk verdeelde culturele budgetten heroverwegen. Deze trends ontmoedigen momenteel plattelandsontwikkeling en -regeneratie. Nationale politici dragen de verantwoordelijkheid voor de ongunstige context waarin rurale gemeenten en hun inwoners opereren. Eenmaal gekozen, kunnen nationale politici ondervertegenwoordigde rurale gemeenten en hun inwoners beter ondersteunen en hun zorgen aanpakken. Op regionaal en lokaal niveau verdienen de toekomstdromen jongvolwassenen qua wonen meer aandacht. De structureel ongunstige politieke positie van rurale gemeenten in Nederland vereist dat zij zelf kansen zoeken om zich meer gehoord en relevant te maken op nationaal niveau. Ze kunnen ook planningsvisies heroverwegen die bezwaar maken tegen de commerciële herbestemming van leegstaande stallen. Het belang van eigen initiatief geldt ook voor burgers, ondernemers, NGO's en gemeenschappen in rurale gemeenten. Om hun problemen aan te pakken, kunnen zij bewustwording creëren bij beleidsmakers op alle overheidsniveaus. Top of Form Bottom of Form

Deze dissertatie draagt bij aan kennis over toekomstige kansen voor jongvolwassenen in rurale gemeenten. Deze kennis kan worden gebruikt door jongvolwassenen, beleidsmakers, wetenschappers en andere betrokkenen. Het kan hun inspanningen ondersteunen om een ruimtelijk rechtvaardige samenleving te creëren waarin jongvolwassenen die dromen van wonen en werken in een rurale gemeente deze droom kunnen verwezenlijken.

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Research background

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Over the past decades, rural municipalities in Europe have been changing. Demographic developments are complicating their future. While the overall population is ageing, rural municipalities in Europe are dealing with depopulation. Especially young adults<sup>1</sup> move from municipalities that can be classified as rural area towards municipalities that can be classified as city (Eurostat, 2023a; See Table 1.1). They are often considered to be looking for better job opportunities (Makkai et al., 2017). As a result, it becomes harder for rural municipalities to use young adults' talents and creativity to develop or regenerate. Moreover, young adults may not raise their children in the region where they have been raised. A negative spiral of leaving young adults resulting in an ageing population, decreased opportunities, and economic decline may be the ultimate consequence. This process raises questions about young adults' current opportunities in rural regions in Europe. Young adults who stay, return, or settle as newcomers in a rural region could also create a positive spiral of generational renewal, more opportunities and economic growth (Murtagh, 2019). Such a positive spiral asks for more knowledge about the motives of young adults to settle in rural municipalities, the opportunities they may have to explore rural development and regeneration and the political context in which these processes occur.

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, young adults are defined as being between 18 and 30 years old

TABLE 1.1 Population development in different types of EU Municipalities, 2013–2022. Source: Eurostat (2023a).

Age group	Municipality type		
	Cities	Towns and suburbs	Rural areas
15 – 24 years old	+4.2%	+0.8%	-19.3%
25 – 64 years old	+4.6%	+3.7%	-15.7%
65 years old and above	+23.4%	+24.5%	+2.2%

Young adults are essential in creating rural development and regeneration. Rural development has traditionally been understood as strengthening the vitality of rural places and people (Moseley, 2003). In some rural regions, the approach of rural development still has relevance. However, the relative economic decline and feelings of neglect in some other rural regions require regeneration. Rural regeneration distinguishes itself from rural development in that it responds to decline and seeks to reinvent and revive rural areas (Pemberton, 2019). As rural regeneration seeks lasting improvements, it aligns with rural planning and processes to seek generational renewal in rural regions (Murtagh et al., 2021). This generational renewal relates to choices by young adults.

The roles of communities and governance in rural regions in Europe have also changed during the past decades. During its first decades, the Common Agricultural Policy [CAP] was focused on the mass production of food (Knudsen, 2011). Top-down governmental policies and a focus on large firms made the countryside a place of production. Since the 1980s, the responsibilities of governments in Europe have diminished. Rural regions and communities have to develop more bottom-up initiatives to support rural development. Since the 1992 MacSharry reform, the CAP has been gradually distancing itself from direct price support to farmers (Daugbjerg, 2003). In response to the exogenous and productivist focus on agriculture as an essential element in rural regions, the CAP increasingly focuses on rural development themes beyond agriculture, based on more bottom-up developments. This new approach could be considered post- or neo-productivist and neo-endogenous (Bosworth et al., 2016). The countryside is no longer considered a place of production but also a place of consumption where inhabitants seek to organise their lives. However, the budgets for rural development in the CAP have recently been reduced (Rac et al., 2020). The relationship between national governments and rural regions has thus continuously altered. The responsibilities for rural development have decentralised to lower levels of government, communities, and individuals.

Meanwhile, the economic development of rural regions in Europe differs from developments in more urban regions. Giannakis and Bruggeman (2020) describe inward migration as a leading economic success factor in urban regions, whereas the ageing of the population hampers economic development in rural regions. Agriculture contributes to the economic strength of the latter (Giannakis & Bruggeman, 2020). However, rural regions in Europe experience the ongoing trend of farm enlargement. Between 2005 and 2020, the total number of farms in the European Union [EU] decreased by 36.1%, whereas the number of farms with at least 100 hectares increased by 28.9% (Eurostat, 2023b). The CAP reforms have not stopped this ongoing farm enlargement. This process also causes more vacant farm buildings (Kristensen et al., 2019). These vacant farm buildings visibly show the changing European landscape. Farm enlargement has also coincided with a more diversified rural economy. Fewer people work in agricultural production, whereas more people work in other jobs in diversified farms and other sectors (Tacconi et al., 2022). This process may also open opportunities for rural development and regeneration.

The political geography in rural regions in Europe has also been changing. Renewal of the economic fabric and feelings of neglect among rural citizens have also affected their political preferences. The increased responsibility for rural development on lower levels of government is a consequence of the decrease of attention to rural regions from national governments (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). In many rural regions in Europe, there is a trend towards voting for populist and anti-establishment parties. This is often related to economic and industrial decline in such regions (Dijkstra et al., 2020). Citizens in post-industrial and rural regions could also feel that they live in a 'place that does not matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Some rural citizens feel that an urban-based political elite lacks knowledge about their concerns and attention to solving their problems (Guilluy, 2016). This explains an increasing gap in political trust between rural and urban citizens (Mitsch et al., 2021). Feelings of rural discontent may also make it more challenging for young adults to create a positive spiral for rural regions in Europe.

The Netherlands is a valuable case to investigate the future of young adults in supporting rural development and regeneration. This highly urbanized country also has rural municipalities that deal with typical European rural issues such as leaving young adults (Thissen et al., 2010), population decline and its socioeconomic consequences (Beunen et al., 2020), vacant farm stables (Gies et al., 2016), and feelings of neglect among rural citizens (Van Vulpen et al., 2023). Therefore, it is interesting to understand how these processes operate in the context of the Netherlands and to explore what this means for the opportunities of young adults in creating rural development and regeneration.

This introduction will first reflect on research themes and theoretical debates on future opportunities for young adults in rural regions and position the research in this dissertation within these themes and debates. Then, it describes the context in which rural regions and municipalities in the Netherlands and their inhabitants operate. Consequently, the problem definition, research aim, and research questions are set out. The introduction then presents the methods and data collection used in this dissertation. Finally, the outline of the dissertation presents an overview of the following chapters.

## 1.2 Debates on future opportunities in rural regions

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This section reflects on theoretical discussions on investigating future opportunities for young adults in rural regions and the political context in which such processes occur. As rural development and regeneration are discussed in multiple research themes and debates, not all of these can be addressed in this dissertation. Ward and Brown (2009) suggested a series of themes and debates that matter in rural development. Despite being relevant, this research does not directly address the theme of sustainable rural development nor the debate on what should constitute rural. It focuses on the following research themes and debates: 1) The research theme of rural demography and the debate on future migration patterns. This helps to explore the migration motives of young adults and reveal the potential they see in rural regions. 2) The research theme of rural communities and governance and the debate on exogenous versus endogenous rural development. This helps to understand what community and governance approaches support rural development and what can be expected of young adults. 3) The research theme of rural economic planning and the debate on productivism, post-productivism and neo-productivism. This helps to suggest what planning strategies could create rural development and regeneration and support job creation for young adults. Ward and Brown (2009) also mentioned the abovementioned three important themes and debates.

Moreover, electoral results in rural regions in the late 2010s and the early 2020s and the emerging literature on the geographies of rural discontent suggest that the political context in which rural regions operate also requires attention. Therefore, this dissertation also addresses the following research theme and debate: 4)

The research theme of rural political geography and the debate on spatial justice for rural regions. This helps to place the opportunities for young adults in rural regions in a political context. The rest of this section describes the four debates, theoretically positions the research in this dissertation, and reveals knowledge gaps the dissertation aims to address.

### 1.2.1 The debate on future migration patterns

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Within the research theme of rural demography, the debate on future migration patterns of young adults in the countryside may focus on young adults who remain in or leave rural regions or rural newcomers from urban regions who move towards the countryside. There are multiple explanations for why young adults leave rural areas. On the one hand, Kashnitsky and colleagues (2021) argue that rural areas depopulate because young adults seek academic education in urban regions, leave and do not return. A lack of career opportunities is often mentioned as an explanation for young adults leaving rural areas (Thissen et al., 2010; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017). However, a lack of available housing has also been mentioned (McKee et al., 2017). Studies thus suggest that more available housing, more career opportunities and effective policies to create these could motivate young adults to stay in rural areas. Rural newcomers can be attracted by the spatial quality of the countryside or by social aspects such as becoming part of a community. However, the advantages of settling in a rural region should outweigh the disadvantages, such as longer commutes to work (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). In an ageing society, where young adults are underrepresented in rural regions, the motives of young adults to move towards or stay in a rural region are essential when seeking future rural opportunities.

There can be different ways to understand how and to what extent these young adults will move in future decades. Most current research on migration from and towards rural regions uses macro-level predictions based on earlier or current migration trends (Coulter & Van Ham, 2013; Stockdale et al., 2013). Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) critique such macro-level demographic predictions on rural depopulation. Their investigation into the future dreams of the Finnish youth finds that a higher percentage of them than demographically predicted would prefer a future in rural areas. This finding suggests that young adults foresee a future for themselves in rural areas but encounter obstacles that make them choose differently. However, there is little knowledge about what obstacles young people foresee and how this may impact their life plans.

This research accepts the critique of Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) and regards their framework to investigate dreams for the future on the micro-level as useful. This framework could further extend knowledge on the foreseen obstacles of young adults in realising their dreams for the future and how these foreseen obstacles impact their future life plans. Knowledge about this could help understand and explore future developments within the research theme of rural demography.

### 1.2.2 **The debate on exogenous versus endogenous rural development**

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The research theme of rural communities and governance analyses the changing context in which rural regions and their inhabitants can support rural development and regeneration. Murdoch (2000) distinguishes between exogenous and endogenous rural development approaches. Exogeneous rural development foresees a vital role for large firms in overcoming market neglect in rural areas. This means that the state or market agencies use a top-down approach with economies of scale to support rural development (Murdoch, 2000). Agricultural modernisation and the large farm stables from the early decades of the CAP are examples of exogenous rural development (Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011). Alternatively, endogenous rural development promotes 'locally rooted, indigenous development capabilities.' (Murdoch, 2000, p.407). This bottom-up approach requires more initiative from local enterprises and citizens who seek to harness local resources (Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011). The use of Local Action Groups in the current CAP and the increased governmental focus on civil society during the 2010s are examples of endogenous rural development (Bosworth et al., 2016).

The concept of exogenous/endogenous rural development reconciles top-down and bottom-up approaches. Its primary understanding is that simultaneously, exogenous and endogenous development processes happen (Murdoch, 2000). The exogenous/endogenous approach to rural development reflects the structuration theory in sociology, which argues that both structural developments and local agents impact economic success and social development (Giddens, 1984). In a globalised world, networks become a significant predictor of economic success. Actors in rural regions require and are part of both local and external networks, but the importance of these differs per location. Therefore, one can accept neither the structuralist theory of exogenous growth nor the endogenous growth theory based on local agency. External effects, local resources and networks of local actors all affect the success of rural development (Lowe et al., 1995, p.103).

Neo-endogenous rural development also seeks to implement vital exogenous and endogenous rural development elements. Shucksmith (2010) defends the trend towards civil participation and decreased governmental interference by arguing that rural places would profit from neo-endogenous growth conditions of openness and development based on local impulses and resources and a minor role for the state. He argues that community-led development enables rural regions to fulfil their growth potential. Therefore, he prefers disintegrated rural development above an integrated approach. The state should enable regions to grow rather than prescribe how to do this. However, Shucksmith (2010, p.12) warns that the state should support less influential stakeholders in this more competitive, neo-endogenous, disintegrated rural development and help communities take the initiative. Gkartzios and Lowe (2019) further specify the neo-endogenous model for rural development. They argue that cooperation between stakeholders, seeking social-spatial justice and balancing local needs is important. This requires a vital role for communities and governments.

This dissertation regards both the exogenous/endogenous development approach and the community-led neo-endogenous development approach as helpful lenses to study the opportunities for rural development and regeneration by young adults in rural regions. Earlier research by Terluin (2003) supports this focus. She examined the extent to which the different approaches for rural development are supported by evidence in European policymaking for rural regions. Terluin (2003) found the most support for the exogenous/endogenous and the community-led neo-endogenous development approach. However, further knowledge on how these development approaches relate to rural regeneration (Pemberton, 2019) and how this applies to organising the increasingly important cultural festivals in the countryside (Mahon & Hyyryläinen, 2019) would be helpful. More knowledge about this could help to investigate the research theme of rural communities and governance.

### 1.2.3 **The debate on productivism, post-productivism and neo-productivism**

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The research theme of rural economic planning relates to the debate on the economic role of the countryside and its productivity. Traditionally, the theory of productivism has dominated thinking about the economic role of the countryside. In the post-war period, European agriculture modernised and maximised production at a fast pace. This approach is known as productivism and aims to produce ample food at low prices (Ilbery & Bowler, 1998). The initial CAP, which eventually led to overproduction and food surpluses, is an example of a productivist outlook on

the countryside. In this outlook, rural areas should produce food for the rest of the country. The quality of life and nature conservation are considered less critical (Ilbey & Bowler, 1998). The many vacant farm buildings in Europe result from this productivist outlook. Ongoing farm enlargement causes superfluous farm buildings.

There have been various critiques of the productivist outlook on the countryside. Marsden (1999) argued that the countryside is more than a space for food production. It is also a space consumed by citizens who seek leisure and residence. Ilbery and Bowler (1998) suggested a post-productivist outlook on the countryside in which agricultural activities should be diversified and extensified. Farmers can transform their farms into production and consumption sites through leisure-related activities. However, Wilson and Burton (2015) critique the argument that post-productivism follows after productivism. They argue that within rural areas, both productivist and post-productivist practices coexist and persist. This means that the productivist era has never finished. The ongoing farm enlargement confirms this argument (Eurostat, 2023b). The current trends in rural development point to cooperative neo-productivism, which is “driven by an alliance of grassroots governance, corporate objectives and government facilitation” (Burton & Wilson, 2012, p.54). Productivist activities have some grassroots support and happen simultaneously with post-productivist practices, as these do not exclude each other (Burton & Wilson, 2012).

The neo-productivist outlook seems attractive in exploring future opportunities for young adults in the countryside in the current context of environmental challenges. Pelucha and Kveton (2017) point out that reducing climate change and biodiversity crises requires a focus on production in the countryside and explains the neo-productivist outlook in the CAP. The countryside is not just a place to extract food and material, but addressing such processes sustainably requires policy focus. As Šimon (2014, p.131) explains, urban newcomers to rural areas often regard the rural as a place of consumption. This fits the idea of a post-productive countryside. However, this idea may clash with young adults’ potential ambitions to seek economic development and job creation within rural regions. Since young adults who move towards urban regions earn more and have better career opportunities than those who stay, it is essential to improve the economic situation in rural regions (Rye, 2006, p.26). Therefore, this dissertation regards the rural as a place of both consumption and production. It has a neo-productivist outlook on rural development and regeneration. However, more knowledge about the relation of neo-productivism to opportunities for young adults would be welcome. This can help investigate the research theme of rural economic planning.

## 1.2.4 The debate on spatial justice for rural regions

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The rural political geography research theme addresses the debate on spatial justice for rural regions. Since the future opportunities for young adults in rural regions partly rely on the political context, it is also necessary to position the research in this dissertation in political theories on the countryside. There has been a scholarly trend to regard urban areas as places where economic policies (Glaeser, 2011) and political power (Barber, 2013) might be concentrated during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These ideas follow the growing economic dominance of urban regions (Dijkstra et al., 2020). However, inhabitants of rural and post-industrial areas increasingly feel left behind, as if they live in places that ‘do not matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Spatial justice is a valuable lens to study this increasing inequality between rural and urban regions. This approach argues that spatial aspects are essential when seeking social justice (Soja, 2013). Initially, spatial justice scholars mainly focused on poor urban neighbourhoods (Nordberg, 2020). More recently, attention has shifted towards rural regions where policymakers may have neglected citizens, invoking rural discontent. Literature on the geography of discontent studies such processes. For example, Guilluy (2016) points to an urban-based elite and its political overrepresentation to explain the lack of political understanding of citizens’ concerns in peripheral areas. Mitsch and colleagues (2021) describe a growing gap in political trust between citizens in urban and rural areas and argue that governments should, among other things, deal with the decreasing level of public services in rural areas to restore trust. These authors show that developments over the past decades have impacted the past and current opportunities for people in rural regions.

The existing rural context of spatial injustice also has relevance for young adults who may plan their future in rural areas. Nordberg (2020) argues for ‘rural spatial justice’ in the form of a place-based approach that enhances the capacities of local citizens. This approach acknowledges the importance of structural inequalities between rural and urban and the opportunities rural citizens may seek to improve their situation. There is, however, a knowledge gap on how the emerging theme of rural spatial justice and the geography of discontent relates to existing research on structural political inequalities through political overrepresentation of certain areas (Fiva & Halse, 2016). This research explores future opportunities for young adults in rural regions. Therefore, it will engage with spatial justice for rural regions to understand the research theme of rural political geography, particularly in the context of rural regions in the Netherlands. This requires more knowledge of how rural and urban citizens are politically represented and the extent to which benefits may result from this representation. This will help to understand the political context in which rural regions, municipalities and their inhabitants operate and how this relates to rural development and regeneration opportunities.

### 1.2.5 Summarising the knowledge gaps

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This section has revealed multiple knowledge gaps in the literature regarding future opportunities for young adults to support rural development and regeneration. Despite existing knowledge on dreams for the future of young adults, there is less knowledge about what obstacles they foresee in realising these dreams and how this may impact their life plans. The existing knowledge of multiple modes of exogenous and endogenous rural development has hardly been related to rural regeneration. Despite existing knowledge of productivist, post-productivist and neo-productivist outlooks on rural economic planning, this could be better related to the meaning for young adults. The emerging knowledge on rural spatial justice and the geography of discontent has hardly been related to research on political representation and its budgetary consequences. By addressing these knowledge gaps, the future of young adults in supporting rural development and regeneration can be investigated. The research themes, debates and knowledge gaps from this section are also relevant in the context of the Netherlands. The following section presents this context.

## 1.3 The research context of regions and rural municipalities in the Netherlands

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In this thesis, the Netherlands serves as a case to study future opportunities for young adults to support rural development and regeneration. This section describes the context in which regions and rural municipalities in the Netherlands and their inhabitants operate. It also explains the increased size and responsibilities of rural municipalities in the Netherlands and that they sometimes can be considered rural regions. This section relates to the research themes described in the previous section.

Demographically, the Netherlands is strongly urbanized and densely populated. Its rural municipalities are always relatively close to more urbanized ones (Eurostat, 2018). This enables people to live in a rural municipality and work in an urban municipality. Nonetheless, especially young adults who seek or have followed theoretical education leave villages and move to urban places (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau [SCP], 2017; Thissen et al., 2010).

Demographic developments in the Netherlands may relate to its housing shortage. Housing prices have soared in the late 2010s and early 2020s, particularly affecting the opportunities for young adults to find appropriate housing (Jonkman et al., 2022). Housing prices have increased more in urban than rural municipalities (Hochstenbach & Arundel, 2020). Different strategies have been suggested on where to build housing to diminish the shortage. This can be done outside or within current settlements [densification], focusing on urban or rural municipalities (Hamers, 2020). These strategies are related to the debate on future migration patterns. The trend over the previous decades mostly shows the growth of urban densification, which can also be explained by the high level of services in urban municipalities (Broitman & Koomen, 2020). This is also confirmed by the strategy of the National housing and construction agenda (Rijksoverheid, 2023). Rural municipalities thus face limited national political support for housing developments. Whereas housing may be too expensive for young adults in urban municipalities, there may be an issue with housing availability for young adults in rural municipalities. The housing stock in such municipalities is being renewed to a smaller extent. It justifies questions of how and where young adults want to reside in the upcoming decades.

Within the research theme of rural communities and governance, decentralisation is the leading development in the Netherlands. The decentralisation of tasks to provinces and municipalities and the consequent cooperation of the latter in regions has made these levels of government more critical, while the national government is taking less responsibility. For example, Dutch provinces have been responsible for nature protection and nature policies and, therefore, have a more significant role in planning since 2011. The province is the primary governmental stakeholder in rural areas outside settlements and acts as an 'area manager' (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). Based on a system of subsidiarity, spatial planning is organised at the lowest level possible (Roodbol-Mekkes & Van den Brink, 2015). The new Planning and Environment Act, which will be implemented in 2024, gives more responsibilities to municipalities in planning decisions (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). Municipalities have also become responsible for healthcare and social policies in the past decade (Hoekman et al., 2018). Decentralisation often goes hand in hand with austerity measures. This leads to a situation in which societal responsibilities have moved from national to lower tiers of government and even to the private sector, individuals and communities. This trend has been characterised as the 'participation society' (Hoekman et al., 2018), which could be understood as a relatively endogenous governance approach.

In response to their increased number of tasks, many small and rural municipalities in the Netherlands have merged or been amalgamated into more urban ones. In 1990, there were 672 municipalities in the Netherlands, with an average of 22,162 inhabitants. In 2019, this had reduced to 355 municipalities, with an average of 48,682 inhabitants (Boogers & Reussing, 2019; Statistics Netherlands, 2023a). New and larger municipalities are considered able to deal with more responsibilities. Rural municipalities in the Netherlands have sometimes become the size of small rural regions. They also increasingly cooperate on a regional level to deal with their more complicated responsibilities (Terlouw, 2016). This may have motivated the national government to introduce region deals, which allocate funding to regions with an integrated plan to improve their region's 'broad welfare' (Regeerakkoord, 2017). The changing responsibilities of rural municipalities and the increased importance of regions make these levels valuable units of analysis for future opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities.

Like the European level, the economic structure of rural municipalities in the Netherlands has been and will be going through a quick transition, invoking discussion on rural economic planning. The employment opportunities in rural municipalities in the Netherlands are diversifying far beyond the once dominant agricultural sector. The economic importance of the latter is continuously decreasing (Koster et al., 2020). In 2020, the Netherlands had 36% fewer farms compared to 2005 (Eurostat, 2023b). Gies and colleagues (2016) projected that the Netherlands will have 16 million m<sup>2</sup> of vacant farm buildings in 2030, 60% more than in 2012. This projection did not even consider the Dutch nitrogen crisis and consequent plans to reduce the animal livestock in the Netherlands. The national government has decided to diminish farming activities close to nature to meet European and national biodiversity targets (Van der Ploeg, 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2022). These economic developments mean that rural municipalities in the Netherlands deal with modernist agriculture's architectural legacy and develop new strategies to reinforce their economic viability.

The context in which rural municipalities in the Netherlands operate also puts them at the centre of rural economic planning discussions on how to use scarce land. In Dutch planning practice, protecting open landscapes has traditionally been important (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994). However, in the upcoming decades, the high population density and multiple spatial claims may invoke fierce competition for land. This struggle for land use could come from productivist, post-productivist and neo-productivist outlooks on rural development. This can already be seen in debates on where to locate additional housing (Hamers, 2020). There are also plans to expand space for business parks, new infrastructure, more sustainable energy, enlarged nature areas, and a potential transformation of agriculture towards more organic farming (RLI, 2021). However, these plans all require space, which is limited.

The economic restructuring of the countryside and the decentralisation of governmental tasks in the Netherlands also have consequences for its rural political geography. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, several debates on spatial justice for rural municipalities developed in the country. From 2019 onwards, farmers in the Netherlands have protested the political response to the nitrogen crisis (Van der Ploeg, 2020; Remkes, 2022). In his report on how to solve the nitrogen crisis, senior politician and governmental advisor Johan Remkes (2022) describes political discontent among a broader group of citizens in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. These citizens experience increasing differences in economic opportunities between their places and the country's more urbanized and central regions. Disappearing services and public transport and decentralisations accompanied by austerity measures give citizens the feeling that they do not matter to the national government (Remkes, 2022), just as Rodríguez-Pose (2018) explained as a feeling among British citizens who voted for Brexit. The results of the March 2023 provincial elections indicate discontent about the lack of governmental attention for rural municipalities in The Netherlands (Rooduijn & De Lange, 2023). The national funding for the cultural sector, which focuses on central regions and the most urbanized municipalities, forms another example (Fonds Podiumkunsten, 2021). This situation has caused opposition from people in less urbanized regions, who work in the cultural sector (Van Ruiten, 2020). This political context consequently puts further pressure on the future of rural municipalities in the Netherlands, especially regarding policies to create opportunities for young adults. It also justifies questioning whether the national government has sufficient attention for rural municipalities and regions outside the central, most urbanized regions of the Randstad.

This section has described the context in which regions and rural municipalities in the Netherlands and their inhabitants operate. It has shown how the research themes and theoretical debates that underpin this research are developing in the practical context of the Netherlands. This enables the specification of this dissertation's problem definition, the research aim and questions in the next section.

## 1.4 Problem definition, research aim and research questions

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### 1.4.1 Problem definition

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More knowledge on future opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands would be helpful. The population of the most urbanized municipalities is increasing quickly, partly because young adults move towards these places (Statistics Netherlands, 2023b). However, it is unclear if young adults leave or do not come to rural municipalities because they want to live more urban or encounter obstacles that prevent them from staying or moving towards rural municipalities. Besides, more knowledge on which approaches help young adults develop rural regions would be helpful (Nordberg, 2020). This requires more attention to the role of governments in comparison to community initiatives in creating rural development and regeneration. Furthermore, there could be more attention to economic opportunities that result from the current restructuring of the countryside and the role of planning policies in this regard. As policies supporting rural development and regeneration also rely on the political context, there is a need for more knowledge on how the political context in the Netherlands benefits more urbanized municipalities over other municipalities. This could relate the debate on spatial justice for rural regions to existing research on political representation and its budgetary consequences.

### 1.4.2 Research aim

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This dissertation is motivated by concerns about the future of young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. These concerns relate to how young adults want to live and work in rural municipalities in the Netherlands, what opportunities they have to do so, and what this requires from policymakers on multiple levels of government. In exploring dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles in realising these dreams, community and government approaches to rural development and regeneration and the role of rural economic planning in this, the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands should also be understood.

Against this background, the primary aim of this dissertation is **to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands, explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities and understand this in the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands.**

Figure 1.1 shows how the primary aim of this dissertation relates to the theoretical debates and research themes that underpin this dissertation and how this is addressed in the research questions.

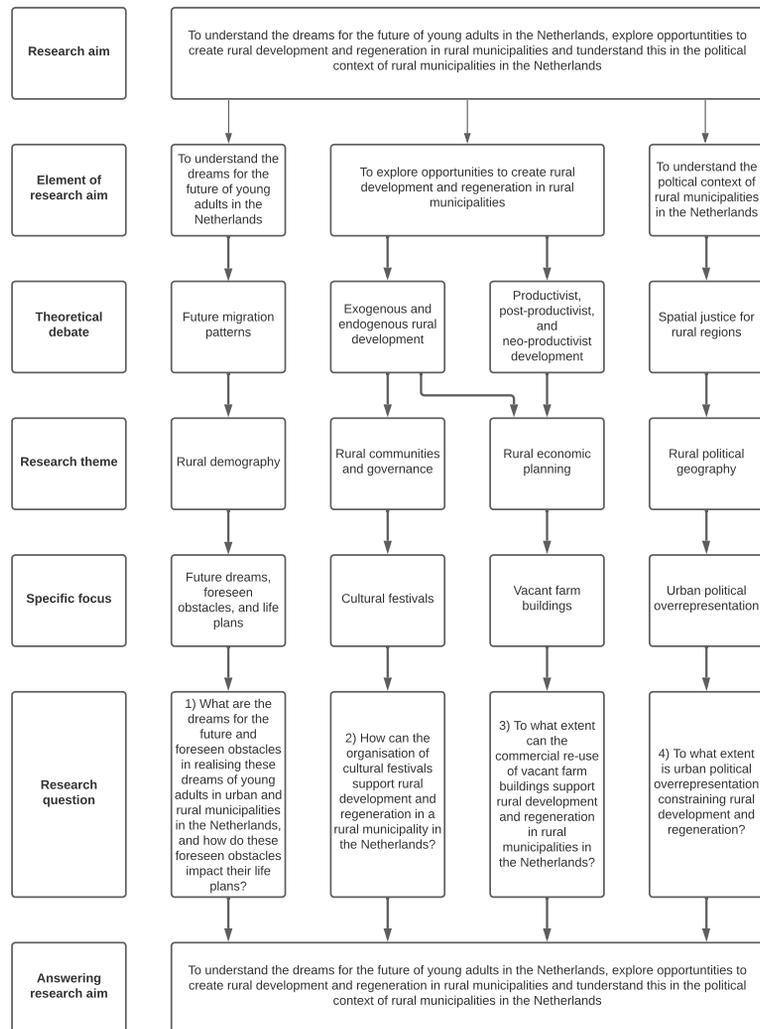


FIG. 1.1 Dissertation summary

### 1.4.3 Research questions

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Based on existing literature and the societal context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands and their inhabitants, four research themes deserve attention to achieve the primary aim of this research (see Figure 1.1). These are 1) rural demography, 2) rural communities and governance, 3) rural economic planning, and 4) rural political geography. The answers to the research questions in this dissertation together seek to achieve the primary aim of this research. They also engage in debates within the research themes mentioned above, albeit only specifically focusing on some topics within these broader research themes.

Research question 1 addresses the research theme of future developments in rural demography. It engages with the debate on where young adults would ideally live and work. The research question focuses specifically on how obstacles can change the stated life plans of those who dream of living in a rural municipality. This topic is relevant since young adults often reside in more urbanized municipalities (SCP, 2017). The answer to this question helps to explore the migration motives of young adults, whether they voluntarily stay in or move towards urban municipalities or because they feel forced by the circumstances. The answer to this question also supports policymakers in seeking opportunities for young adults to create rural development and regeneration. Research question 1 is as follows:

- 1 **What are the dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles in realising these dreams of young adults from urban and rural municipalities in the Netherlands, and how do these foreseen obstacles impact their life plans?**

Research question 2 addresses the research theme of the role of rural communities and governance in supporting rural development and regeneration. It engages with the debate on exogenous and endogenous development strategies. Spatial justice discussions on the division of cultural subsidies in the Netherlands warrant a specific focus on the emerging trend of rural cultural festivals (Van Ruiten, 2020). This research question enables a case study on community-led, private-led and public-led cultural festivals in the rural Oldambt municipality in the Netherlands. The answer to this question helps us understand what type of festivals contribute most to rural development and regeneration: community-led, private-led, or public-led. This can also suggest what community and governance approaches support rural development and regeneration. Research question 2 is as follows:

- 2 **How can the organisation of cultural festivals support rural development and regeneration in a rural municipality in the Netherlands?**

Research question 3 addresses the research theme of rural economic planning. It engages with the debates on exogenous and endogenous development strategies and productivism, post-productivism and neo-productivism. The ongoing agricultural transformation and increasing number of vacant farm buildings in the Netherlands require a specific focus on the vacant farm buildings topic (Gies et al., 2016). This is operationalised in a case study on the commercial re-use of two vacant farm buildings in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. The answer to this question helps to explore the opportunities for commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings in the Netherlands, specifically focusing on young adults and the role of governance. This helps to suggest what planning strategies could create rural development and regeneration and support job creation for young adults. Research question 3 is as follows:

**3 To what extent can the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings support rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities in the Netherlands?**

Research question 4 addresses the research theme of political geography in the countryside. It engages with the debates on spatial justice and the geography of discontent. The research question focuses specifically on urban political overrepresentation. Given the political discontent in the Dutch countryside, this topic deserves attention (Rooduijn & De Lange, 2023). This is done by examining the political overrepresentation of the most urbanized municipalities and the Netherlands and how this situation may impact access to funding for municipalities. The answer to this question helps to place the opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities in a political context. More broadly, the answer to this question also links emerging knowledge of political discontent to the literature on political representation and its budgetary consequences. Research question 4 is as follows:

**4 To what extent is urban political overrepresentation constraining rural development and regeneration?**

Together, the four research questions of this dissertation seek to achieve its primary aim (see Figure 1.1). Research question 1 helps to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands. Research questions 2 and 3 help to explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. Research question 4 helps to understand the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the answer to each question could also help to contextualise the answer to other questions. This helps this dissertation to explain how young adults want to live and work in rural municipalities in the Netherlands, how they can be enabled to do so, and what this requires from policymakers on multiple levels of government.

## 1.5 Methods and data collection

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This section explains the definitions this dissertation uses, the research methods on which it is based and how data have been collected. This dissertation uses the Eurostat (2023c) definition for regions. On the European scale, this means that regions are operationalized as NUTS3 regions, which can be either predominantly urban, intermediate, or predominantly rural. The Netherlands mostly consists of predominantly urban and intermediate regions and just has one predominantly rural region (Eurostat, 2023c). On the European level, this dissertation uses the Eurostat operationalization in LAU2 to define the degree of urbanization of municipalities. This classifies municipalities in three categories: cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas (Eurostat, 2023d). On the European level, rural municipalities are defined differently than on the level of the Netherlands. This dissertation only uses the European level to set the broader context (Table 1.1).

There are multiple ways to define rural municipalities in the Netherlands. One could use the population size or the degree of urbanization within each municipality. Both options have advantages and disadvantages. A municipality's population size helps explain the differences between municipalities with many and relatively few inhabitants. However, it does not always reflect how 'rural' these municipalities are due to the ongoing process of municipal mergers in the Netherlands. This process sometimes results in large and populated municipalities that lack urban centres and mainly consist of rural towns and villages (Allers et al., 2021).

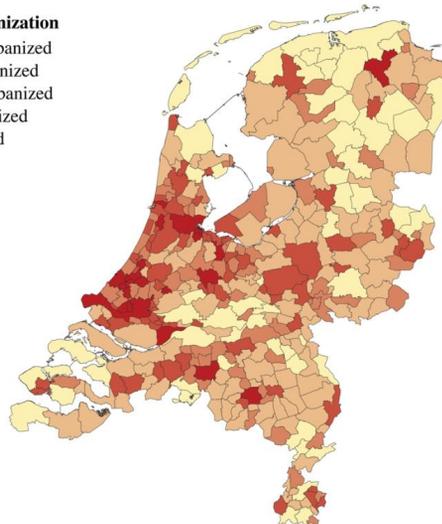
The degree of urbanization within each municipality constitutes a more useful unit of analysis. Statistics Netherlands (2020a) classifies each municipality according to its degree of urbanization. This is based on the average density of addresses within a one-kilometre distance of all the addresses within a municipality (Statistics Netherlands, 2020a). The classification leads to five categories of municipalities in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2020b). Figure 1.2 shows how these are divided across the country.

- 1 Not urbanized (fewer than 500 addresses per km<sup>2</sup>)
- 2 Hardly urbanized (500-1,000 addresses per km<sup>2</sup>)
- 3 Moderately urbanized (1,000-1,500 addresses per km<sup>2</sup>)
- 4 Strongly urbanized (1,500-2,500 addresses per km<sup>2</sup>)
- 5 Extremely urbanized (2,500 addresses or more per km<sup>2</sup>)

This dissertation considers all hardly urbanized and not urbanized municipalities as rural municipalities. This means all municipalities with fewer than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre are rural. Within this definition, some villages are not considered part of rural municipalities. This is because they are part of a municipality with a high degree of urbanization, mainly because it includes a city. Due to their closeness to a city, the situation of such villages may also differ from villages in municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization. Hence, although by no means perfect, the degree of urbanization within each municipality is the most suitable unit of analysis. Finally, this dissertation sometimes refers to rural towns, villages or communities. They are always part of a larger rural municipality.

**Degree of Urbanization**

- Extremely Urbanized
- Strongly Urbanized
- Moderatly Urbanized
- Hardly Urbanized
- Not Urbanized



**FIG. 1.2** Degree of urbanization by municipality in the Netherlands, 2019. Source: Statistics Netherlands (2020b).

This dissertation is mainly based on qualitative research, with some quantitative exceptions. Section 1.2 has positioned this dissertation in the themes and debates it addresses. The methods differ slightly in each research question. The specific methods used to answer each research question are summarised in Figure 1.3.

To answer research question 1, 274 qualitative surveys have been conducted among young adults in the Dutch regions of Midden-Noord-Brabant and Zeeland to explore their dreams for the future and the obstacles they foresee in realising these dreams. Twelve survey respondents have also participated in focus groups that analyse the impact of foreseen obstacles on the life plans of young adults.

Research question	Chapter	Methods	Purpose
1) What are the dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles of young adults in urban and rural municipalities in the Netherlands, and how do these foreseen obstacles impact their life plans?	Chapter 2	Qualitative surveys and Focus groups	To understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands
2) How can the organisation of cultural festivals support rural development and regeneration in a rural municipality in the Netherlands?	Chapter 3	Semi-structured interviews	To explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities
3) To what extent can the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings support rural development and regeneration in a rural municipality in the Netherlands?	Chapter 4	Semi-structured interviews and Document analysis	To explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities
4) To what extent is urban political overrepresentation constraining rural development and regeneration?	Chapter 5	Descriptive statistics and Document analysis	To understand the political context that rural municipalities in the Netherlands are dealing with

FIG. 1.3 Overview of research questions, chapters, used methods and research aims

To answer research question 2, nineteen semi-structured interviews have been conducted with stakeholders around the Oldambt festivals and local youth. The stakeholders include festival organisers, civil servants, politicians, local entrepreneurs, and citizens.

To answer research question 3, 23 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with relevant stakeholders to the commercially re-used vacant farm buildings. These include owners of the re-used buildings, entrepreneurs and employees within the re-used buildings, local entrepreneurs and politicians, representatives from village councils and civil servants on the local and provincial levels. Furthermore, local planning policy documents have been analysed.

To answer research question 4, this dissertation presents an overview of the place of residence of national politicians in the Netherlands. Descriptive statistics show which municipal degree of urbanization is overrepresented among national politicians. Next, it has been investigated how this overrepresentation benefits this type of municipality and its citizens. This is done by document analysis on the access to funding from the national government for municipalities in different degrees of urbanization, and by descriptive statistics on the proportion of money municipalities in the Netherlands have received from the region deals.

The research on which this dissertation is based was part of a Horizon 2020 project, Ruralization, which aimed to 'change development patterns in rural areas, overcoming population and economic decline and generating new opportunities' (Ruralization, 2023). The project specifically focused on young adults. The data for the research have been collected and stored under its approved Data Management Plan. The regions and municipalities where research has taken place are shown in Figure 1.4.

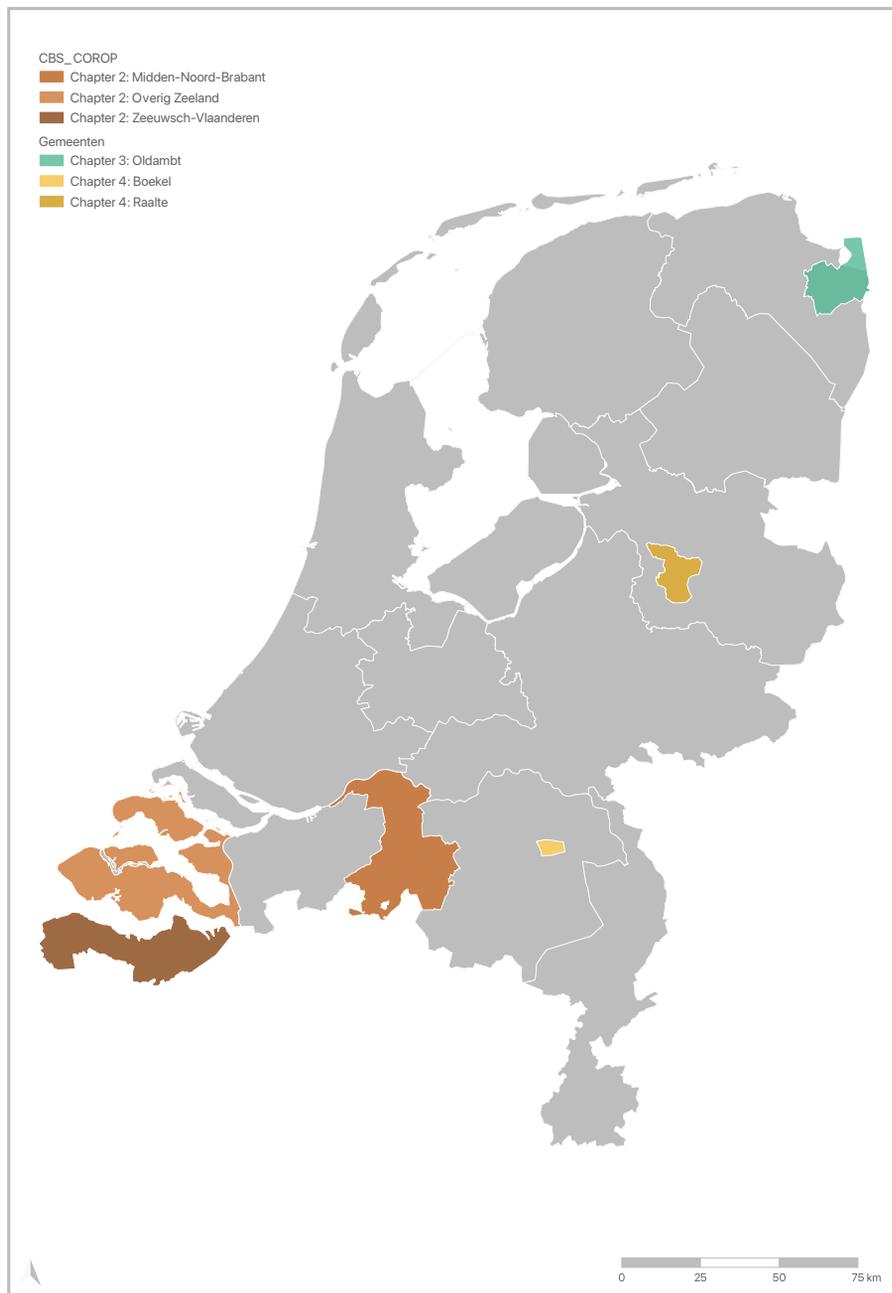


FIG. 1.4 Investigated regions and municipalities per chapter

## 1.6 Outline of the thesis

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This section outlines for each chapter what the reader can expect (see Figure 1.3). Chapter 2 answers research question 1 and aims to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands. It focuses on young adults in urban and rural municipalities from two regions in the Netherlands: Midden-Noord-Brabant and Zeeland. It analyses their dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles in realising these dreams, and the influence of these obstacles on their stated life plans. This also informs a discussion on the role of policymakers in supporting the realisation of the dreams for the future.

Chapter 3 answers research question 2 and aims to explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. It focuses on the role of rural communities and governance through a case study of four cultural festivals in the rural Oldambt municipality: Festival Hongerige Wolf, Grasnapsky, Pura Vida, and Waterbei. Chapter 3 investigates the festivals' local legitimacy, rootedness, and ability to create interconnectedness. It also discusses the transferability of the festivals' organizational models to support regeneration elsewhere.

Chapter 4 answers research question 3 and also aims to explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. It focuses on the role of rural economic planning in rural municipalities through two case studies on the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings in the Netherlands: Mouthoeve in Boekel, Noord-Brabant and The Green East in Raalte, Overijssel. Chapter 4 explicitly analyses governance issues, the contribution of commercial re-use to rural development, and how re-use helps retain or attract young adults. It then discusses whether the current planning systems can deal with the upcoming complex rural transformation processes.

Chapter 5 answers research question 4 and aims to understand the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands. It focuses on political geography and the countryside by examining urban political overrepresentation and the access to public funding of municipalities with different degrees of urbanization. Chapter 5 illustrates how urban political overrepresentation operates, the unequal access to public funding for municipalities with different degrees of urbanization and how this was shown in the funding that municipalities received from the region deals between 2017 and 2020. It also discusses how better access to funding for extremely urbanized municipalities may explain rural political discontent.

Chapter 6 synthesises the preceding chapters and arguments of this dissertation. It assesses how the dissertation answers and achieves its primary aim. This chapter further reflects on the scholarly implications for debates on the future of rural regions and societal implications for those involved with the topic of young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. Chapter 6 also discusses the limitations of the research of this dissertation. It concludes with recommendations for further research and a final statement by the author.

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# 2 Rural Residence

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## Dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles by young adults from the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the dreams for the future of young adults in Midden-Noord-Brabant and Zeeland, the Netherlands. Through 274 qualitative surveys and focus groups with 12 participants, it explores their dreams for the future, the obstacles they foresee in realising these dreams, and the influence of these obstacles on their stated life plans. The findings reveal a preference for areas outside settlements in residential dreams. Limited housing and career opportunities are identified as foreseen obstacles. These obstacles shape participants' stated life plans, which become more urban-oriented. Removing these obstacles can facilitate the realisation of rural residential dreams and promote rural areas as attractive areas to settle for new generations.

**KEYWORDS** young adults; dreams for the future; life plans; rural-urban migration; rural housing.

**ABSTRACT** Dit artikel richt zich op toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen. Het rapporteert exploratief onderzoek in twee Nederlandse regio's: Midden-Noord-Brabant en Zeeland. 274 kwalitatieve enquêtes geven inzicht in toekomstdromen en voorziene obstakels in het realiseren hiervan. Focusgroepen met 12 respondenten wijzen op de invloed van voorziene obstakels op de levensplannen van jongvolwassenen. De resultaten wijzen op de populariteit van buitengebieden. Het tekort aan huizen en carrièremogelijkheden in rurale gebieden vormen voorziene obstakels. Respondenten maken meer stadsgerichte levensplannen vanwege deze obstakels. Het wegnemen van voorziene obstakels kan helpen om rurale toekomstdromen te realiseren en rurale gebieden aantrekkelijker te maken voor jongvolwassenen.

**SLEUTELWOORDEN** jongvolwassenen; toekomstdromen; levensplannen; platteland-stad migratie; ruraal wonen.

### Highlights

- Many young Dutch adults dream of living in rural areas and outside settlements.
- The lack of available housing in rural areas is the most foreseen obstacle.
- The lack of career opportunities in rural areas is the second-most foreseen obstacle.
- Foreseen obstacles to rural futures make young adults' life plans more urban-oriented.

## 2.1 Introduction

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Many rural areas in Europe are losing population to urban areas. Previous research has given attention to why young people make such a move. Career opportunities are most cited (Thissen et al., 2010; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017), whereas lack of available housing (McKee et al., 2017) and policies have also been mentioned (Pinilla & Sáez, 2021). The social and economic future of rural areas relies to a large extent on young people. Nevertheless, once rural populations decline, it becomes difficult to reverse this process and remain attractive and liveable for young adults (Elshof et al., 2014). Therefore, it is essential to understand why young adults might leave or not go to rural areas.

It is difficult to forecast future rural population development. Researchers have used past or current migration patterns to investigate this phenomenon (Coulter & Van Ham, 2013; Stockdale et al., 2013). Other researchers focus on the correlation between stated and revealed residential preferences (Earnhart, 2002; Vasanen, 2012; Hasanzadeh et al., 2019). Such studies show classic rural push and urban pull factors to explain rural-to-urban migration (Gollin et al., 2002; Davis & Henderson, 2003). However, these types of research do not reveal the dreams of the people who move. It remains to be seen if young adults move to urban areas because this fulfils their dreams for the future or because they are not able to fulfil their dreams in a rural area. Knowledge about their dreams for the future may help to explain how young adults develop their life plans and why they make eventual decisions (Anderson et al., 2005).

There has been attention to the role of dreams for the future in actual migration behaviour. Dreams for the future describe how people ideally see their life in fifteen years. Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) argue that the actual migration behaviour of families and young adults partly relies on their dreams for the future. These dreams can be divided into residential dreams, focusing on accommodation; lifestyle dreams, focusing on hobbies and family aspirations; and career dreams, focusing on work. Therefore, the current desires, preferences, and dreams for young adults' future are significant and can be used, in part, to explore future migration (Kuhmonen et al., 2016).

This can be strengthened by incorporating foreseen obstacles in realising dreams and, hence, the stated life plans of young adults. Foreseen obstacles can be anything that young adults personally foresee as an obstacle in realising their dreams for the future. The stated life plans of young people incorporate the foreseen obstacles and describe where and how someone plans to live in the future. Hence, there can be differences between the dreams for the future of young adults and their stated life plans, which tend to be more realistic (Anderson et al., 2005; Brooks & Everett, 2008; Yuliawati & Ardyan, 2020). Knowledge about the obstacles that may impede the realisation of dreams for the future, and their influence on the stated life plans of young people with a rural residential dream, may add to the knowledge of young adults and their future. This also helps policymakers in rural areas. They can focus on removing foreseen obstacles to reduce the influence of these obstacles on the stated life plans of young adults with a rural residential dream.

This paper explores the dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles of young Dutch adults with both an urban and rural background and how these obstacles influence their stated life plans. The paper addresses the following research questions: *What are the dreams for the future of young Dutch adults? What obstacles do young adults with a rural residential dream foresee in realising these dreams? And how are these foreseen obstacles influencing their stated life plans?*

To investigate the research questions, the paper applied the exploratory survey method of Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) to assess the future residential, lifestyle, and career dreams and foreseen obstacles of 274 survey respondents. These were all young Dutch adults recruited from rural and urban areas. Three focus groups with, in total, twelve survey respondents with a rural residential dream were then held to assess how these foreseen obstacles influenced their stated life plans. During the focus groups, it was explained to participants how the concept of dreams for the future differs from the concept of stated life plans.

## 2.2 Literature review

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This paper aims to shed light on the dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles, and stated life plans of young Dutch adults. The rest of this section reviews earlier research on these topics and explains the theoretical underpinning of using these concepts.

There is an emerging literature on the future migration behaviour of young adults, with different approaches being used to investigate this. Some scholars use 'stated' preferences to estimate where young people want to live in the future (Van Dam et al., 2002; Vasanen, 2012). This can later be compared with actual behaviour, the 'revealed' preferences. González and colleagues (2021) investigated what aspects influence whether young people decide to remain in or move away from a rural area. They found that solid mobility opportunities and feelings of belonging predict if young people want to remain. Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) introduced a new approach to investigate the future migration behaviour of young adults: future dreams. The future dream is an individual micro-future that consists of three elements: residence, lifestyle, and career (Kuhmonen et al., 2016). 'A future dream connects the personal dreams and intentions to specific possible states of the future toward which one is inclined to navigate.' (Kuhmonen et al., 2021, p.11). This paper refers to 'future dreams' as 'dreams for the future', as it clarifies that this concept describes current dreams for future situations rather than dreams that may appear in the future.

Since this paper uses the dreams for the future approach, it first explains the importance of residence, lifestyle, and career elements. The residential dreams of young adults form an important part of their dreams for the future. If they fulfil their residential dreams, young adults will live in their intended place or environment of residence. Previous research has shown that stated residential preference strongly correlates with residential choice and, therefore, revealed preference (Earnhart, 2002; Vasanen, 2012; Hasanzadeh et al., 2019). This suggests that the residential dreams of young adults correlate with their eventual residential choices. Hence, these residential dreams are an important element of the dreams for the future.

Lifestyle dreams are another important part of the dreams for the future of young adults. Some people have hobbies that tie them to specific residential locations. For others, spending time with family or friends is so important that they will adjust their residential choices accordingly (Rérat, 2014; Cook & Cuervo, 2020). Studies show that lifestyle preferences also impact residential preferences and, ultimately, residential choices (Ærø, 2006; Frenkel et al., 2013). This suggests that the lifestyle

dreams of young adults have predictive value on their eventual residential choices. Hence, these lifestyle dreams are an important element of the dreams for the future.

Career dreams are an important element in the dreams for the future of young adults as well. A dream to work for the national government in The Hague can hardly be combined with a dream of living in a remote rural area. Career dreams could influence the overall dreams for the future (Kim et al., 2003; Mao & Wang, 2020). This suggests that career dreams are an important element in the dreams for the future of young adults. On the other hand, the increased opportunities to work remotely may slightly diminish the importance of the work location for life plans and eventual residential choices (Davies, 2021). For example, the Covid-19 pandemic led to increased remote work in The Netherlands. Meanwhile, the difference in house prices between cities and less urban areas diminished. However, it is unclear if this latest pattern can be related to the Covid-19 pandemic (PBL, 2021; NVM, 2022). Moreover, since many jobs are always tied to specific geographical locations, the work location has some effect (Althoff et al., 2022). Therefore, young adults' career dreams are an important part of their dreams for the future.

Knowledge about foreseen obstacles in realising dreams can suggest which dreams for the future are also part of the stated life plans of young adults. Obstacles will impact the stated life plans and future residential choices of young adults. People's resources and the constraints they foresee, such as housing availability, career opportunities, and personal circumstances, impact their ultimate migration moves (Van Dam et al., 2002; Jansen, 2020). This suggests the importance of foreseen obstacles in the eventual residential choices of young adults. After all, 'changing preferences and various obstacles may cause future dreams to not become a reality.' (Kuhmonen et al., 2021, p.11).

However, long before that moment, foreseen obstacles can influence the life plans of young adults. Foreseen obstacles are personal. Housing prices may be a foreseen obstacle for one person and an unforeseen obstacle for someone else. If people foresee too many obstacles in fulfilling their dreams, they may not even pursue them. This will lead to a stated life plan that differs from the dream for the future. Future changes can also influence the eventual choices of young adults regarding the obstacles and dreams they do not foresee yet. However, as these unforeseen obstacles and dreams are yet unknown, they will not influence their stated life plans.

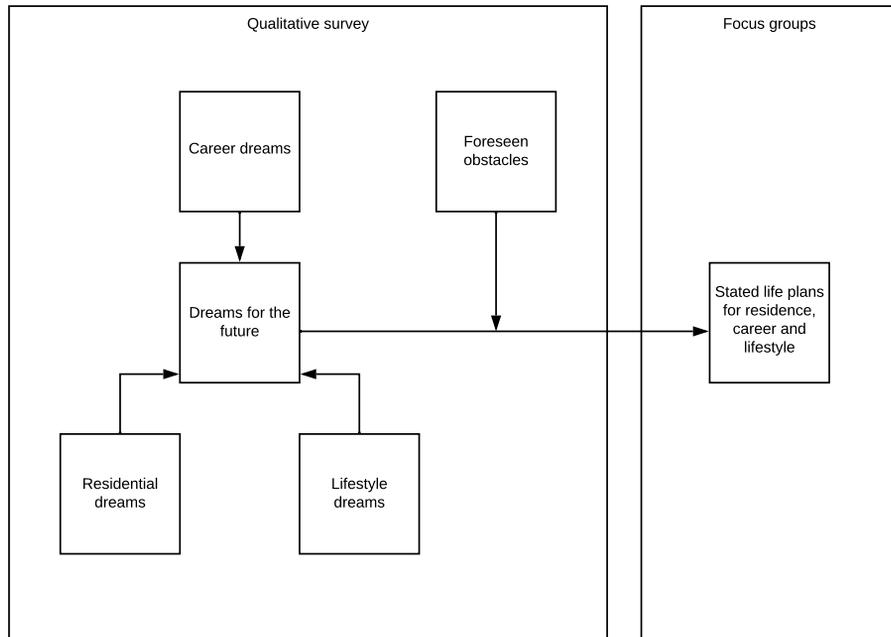
Stated life plans differ from stated preferences and dreams for the future. Van Dam and colleagues (2002) explained how stated preferences for rural living are based on the characteristics of the household and images of the countryside. They represent ideals of future living rather than concrete life plans. Kuhmonen and colleagues

(2021, p.11) explain future dreams as a future towards which people are 'inclined to navigate'. In their stated life plans, on the other hand, respondents consider the foreseen obstacles in realising their dreams for the future. Therefore, their stated life plans are expected to be more realistic than their dreams for the future or their stated preferences.

The extent to which stated life plans have predictive value has been the subject of sociological debate since the 2000s. Anderson and colleagues (2005) have demonstrated that adolescents think ahead about their future and plan accordingly. The life plans of adolescents could predict their future behaviour to some extent (Anderson et al., 2005). In contrast, Brannen and Nilsen (2007) noted that the life plans of young adults could be ambiguous as they are often subject to recent experiences, and many young people still need to plan for their future life. Unforeseen events in the future, such as economic crises, are likely to impact the realisation of life plans (Brannen & Nilsen, 2007). This critique is relevant for this paper, as the research on which it is based was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, stated life plans do have some predictive value. Brooks and Everett (2008) investigated university graduates. They showed that university graduates are engaged in serious life planning while weighing options and taking responsibility for life choices, which partly depend on their stated life plans. This was confirmed in a more recent study (Yuliawati & Ardyan, 2020). This suggests that the stated life plans of people predict, to some extent, their future residential choices. Although life plans cannot perfectly predict such future behaviour, they show what young adults aim for and suggest what they might do in the future. Moreover, potential differences between dreams for the future and stated life plans show the influence of foreseen obstacles.

The dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles, and stated life plans of young Dutch adults have been explored through the analytical framework shown in Figure 2.1. The method section will further explain how the research has been conducted.



**FIG. 2.1** Framework used for analysing dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles and stated life plans.  
Source: This research.

## 2.3 Context of the study area and methods

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The Netherlands is a strongly urbanised and densely populated country (World Bank, 2022) with a relatively large service sector and a small agricultural sector with decreasing employment opportunities (Thelen, 2019; Koster et al., 2020). Dutch rural areas are always relatively close to urban areas (Eurostat, 2018). Currently, the country has an urgent housing shortage, with young adults facing increasing difficulties in buying or renting suitable housing (Jonkman et al., 2022). In the previous decade, housing prices have soared throughout the country (NVM, 2022). Because of the high population density and multiple spatial claims, there is fierce competition for land in the Netherlands. This can be seen in plans for additional housing and business parks, new infrastructure, more sustainable energy, enlarged nature areas, and a potential transformation of agriculture towards more organic farming. These plans all require space, which is limited (RLI, 2021).

A qualitative survey was organised to explore the dreams for the future of young Dutch adults and the obstacles they foresaw in realising them. The respondents were surveyed between April and August 2020. Additional focus groups with survey respondents were held in October and November 2020 to explore how these obstacles may influence stated life plans. In the exploratory design of the research, the representativeness of the respondents was not required. Nonetheless, we aimed for a wide variety of dreams to be portrayed, with at least 100 survey respondents from both urban and rural municipalities. This helps to show the existing dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles of a large group of young adults.

The sampling efforts focused on people aged 18-30 in two Nuts-3 regions. These regions were chosen because they reflect the two dominant types of regional urbanity in the Netherlands, according to the Eurostat regional typology, namely Predominantly urban [Midden-Noord-Brabant] and Intermediate [Overig Zeeland] regions (Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat, 2022b). Moreover, Midden-Noord-Brabant and Overig Zeeland are closest to the Dutch average in their respective categories when combining the following parameters: number of inhabitants, population density, population growth, gender balance, median age, fertility, long term GDP-growth, employment level, employment distribution by sector, and level of education (Eurostat, 2022a). The results from these close-to-average regions may also indicate the general situation in the country. Figure 2.2 shows the location of the regions that were important for this research.

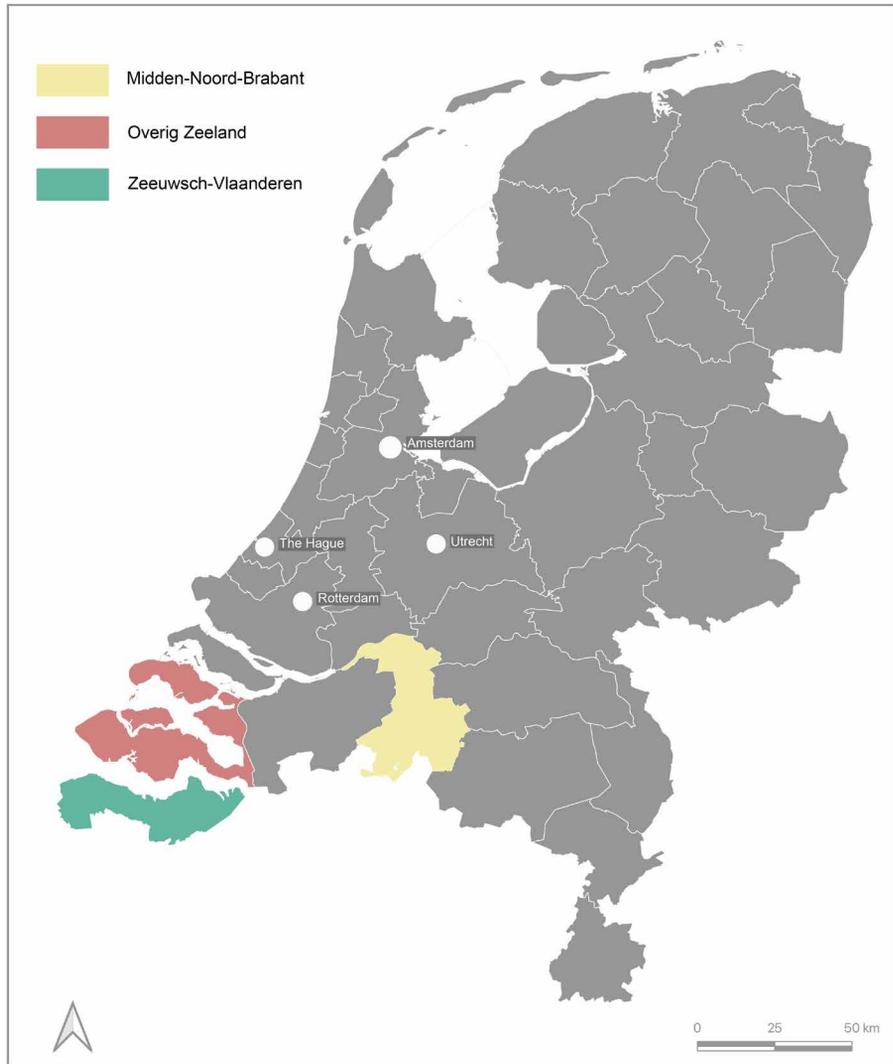


FIG. 2.2 Researched regions. Source: This research

To define urban and rural areas within these regions in the Dutch context, this research uses the classification of Statistics Netherlands based on the degree of urbanisation per municipality (2022a). This classification measures the average density of addresses per municipality. Municipalities with less than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre, classified as not urbanised and hardly urbanised (Statistics Netherlands, 2022a), are considered rural. Municipalities with more than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre, classified as moderately urbanised, strongly urbanised, and extremely urbanised (Statistics Netherlands, 2020a), are considered urban.

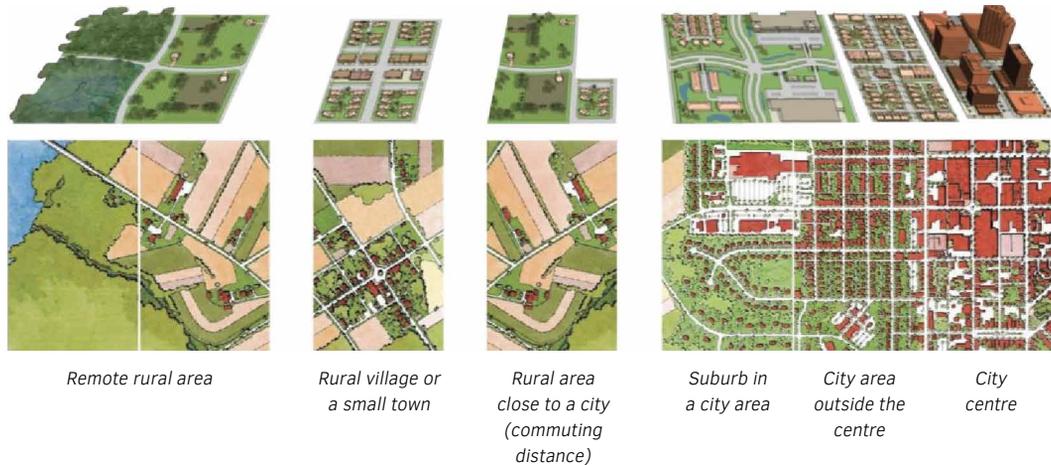
During the sampling period, the qualitative survey was disseminated in various ways. In Midden-Noord-Brabant, one municipality in the region [Baarle-Nassau], youth and student groups and a local sports association approached young adults in the age group to participate. In Overig Zeeland, this was done through village councils and social media platforms and the promotion of the survey among students by a secondary vocational education school and a university of applied sciences. In total, 274 respondents participated in the research. Within this group of respondents, the age category of 18-23 years and people living in rural municipalities are overrepresented (see Table 2.1). This can be explained by the role of educational institutions during the sampling process and the survey topic. Young adults who were less focused on their dreams for the future and those without rural dreams were less likely to have participated. The educational institutions that helped disseminate the survey have a geographical focus beyond the regions where the sampling efforts were focused. This led to a relatively high number of respondents (n=24) from the Predominantly rural region of Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen (Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat, 2022b). The rurality of this region also increased the number of participants from a rural municipality. All the data for this research was collected in Dutch and translated into English by the author of this paper.

TABLE 2.1 Composition (%) of the sample and the population. Source: This research; Statistics Netherlands (2022b).

Indicator	Sample	Population (18-30 years of age)
Type of municipality where respondents reside		
Urban	39.1 (n=107)	60.7
Rural	60.9 (n=167)	39.3
Age category		
18-23 years	64.2 (n=176)	47.1
24-30 years	35.8 (n=98)	52.9
Gender		
Male	44.2 (n=121)	51.1
Female	55.8 (n=153)	48.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0 (n=274)</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The survey was based on an earlier survey by Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016). It was disseminated as part of European-scale research into the future of rural areas (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). It first asks respondents for background information, then for them to make a choice between six illustrated and described residential environments: the city centre; a city area outside the centre; a suburb in a city area; a rural area close to a city; a rural village; and a remote rural area (see Figure 2.3). Respondents selected which area types they were born in, which they were living during their response, and which they dreamed of living in fifteen years when they would be 33-45 years old (Kuhmonen et al., 2021).

The respondents also indicated in which place of residence they dreamed of residing in fifteen years. This helps to explain where precisely the respondents' dreams are located and what meaning they give to the residential environments. It reveals, for example, what type of areas respondents characterise as a 'rural village' or a 'suburb in a city area'. Following the classification between urban and rural municipalities, respondents who dream of residing in a municipality with less than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre are considered to have a 'rural residential dream' (Statistics Netherlands, 2022a). These rural residential dreams received special attention concerning the obstacles that respondents foresaw in realising them and how these foreseen obstacles influenced their stated life plans. Respondents then answered questions describing their residential, work, and lifestyle dreams in fifteen years. In the questions, some explanation was given about what topics are involved in these different dreams for the future (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). This information was collated to form a description of the dreams for the future of young adults, as the analytical framework shows (see Figure 2.1).



**FIG. 2.3** Illustrated and described residential environment. Source: Kuhmonen et al., 2021. It was translated into Dutch by the authors.

This research adds two elements to the approach of Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016). First, respondents described the obstacles they foresaw in realising their future residential, career, and lifestyle dreams (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). This helped to understand which part of their dreams for the future might not be considered achievable by young Dutch adults. After describing their dreams for the future, respondents answered the following question: *What obstacles do you foresee in realising these dreams?* Second, respondents were asked to what extent they felt their survey answers were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which dominated the news throughout the survey period (Kuhmonen et al., 2021).

The descriptions of dream futures and foreseen obstacles varied in length. They were analysed using the directed content analysis method, which utilises research data to build on an existing framework (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). The existing framework categorised residential dreams, career dreams, lifestyle dreams, and foreseen obstacles. (Kuhmonen et al., 2016). The content of the dreams and obstacles were analysed for these categories.

To investigate how the foreseen obstacles in realising dreams for the future influence the stated life plans of young adults, three focus groups were organised. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, two focus groups were held online and one face-to-face. Focus groups support the study of how individuals collectively understand phenomena and construct meaning around them (Wilkinson, 1999). They also help to understand why people make particular choices (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The twelve focus group participants, four per session, were recruited from the survey

respondents, who could leave their e-mail addresses if they were interested in further participation. Table 2.2 shows some more background on the focus group participants. As they mostly lived in rural municipalities, the results of the focus groups say most about the stated life plans of young adults with a rural background.

TABLE 2.2 Composition of the focus groups. Source: This research.

Indicator	Focus group participants
<b>Type of municipality where respondents reside</b>	
Urban	1
Rural	11
<b>Age category</b>	
18-23 years	8
24-30 years	4
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	5
Female	7
<b>Level of education</b>	
Secondary	7
Tertiary	5
<b>Mentioned future professions, open answers</b>	
Health sector	(n=3)
Public sector	(n=2)
Water sector	(n=2)
Finance sector	(n=1)
Environment sector	(n=1)
Accountant	(n=1)
Entrepreneur	(n=1)
Farmer	(n=1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

During the focus groups, which took an hour each, the survey results were discussed with and interpreted by participants, who could also explain their dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles. Consequently, the participants could discuss how they would deal with foreseen obstacles and what this meant for their stated life plans. For example, what choice would they make if they had both a rural residential dream and a career dream that required them to live closer to an urban area? This additional analysis was used to understand how the stated life plans of young adults with a rural residential dream were influenced by their dreams for the future and the obstacles they foresaw in realising them.

The focus group results were also analysed using the directed content analysis method (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). The survey results analysis provided the existing framework. New topics that were raised during the focus groups were also analysed. The result section will first show the results of the qualitative survey: the dreams for the future and the foreseen obstacles. Then, it will show how the foreseen obstacles of focus group participants influenced their stated life plans. If these stated life plans differ from their dreams for the future, young adults make life decisions that do not align with their dreams.

## 2.4 Results

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### 2.4.1 Residential dreams

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The respondents generally dreamed of staying within, or close to, their current place of residence. Tables 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 show multiple categories of respondents and how their indicated preferred place of residence in fifteen years compares to their current place of residence. Respondents often specifically indicated their current place of residence as their dream place of residence in fifteen years [52%]. This percentage is even higher for male respondents [60%, see Table 2.3] and respondents who live in a rural municipality [57%, see Table 2.5]. Female respondents (see Table 2.3) and respondents from urban municipalities (see Table 2.5) are more willing to move to other places. The two age groups in this research have more minor differences in their answers (see Table 2.4). The results show more interest among young adults in staying within the same area than previous research on young people in peripheral regions in Belgium and the Netherlands suggested (Thissen et al., 2010). This result confirms the suggestion of Stockdale and Haartsen (2018) that there is an emerging trend in rural areas for people to stay.

TABLE 2.3 Indication of preferred place of residence in 15 years Female/Male/Total. Source: This research

Place of residence	Answers per category (female)	%	Answers per category (male)	%	Total answers per category	%
Same as current place of residence	70	46	72	60	142	52
Same municipality	12	8	9	7	21	8
Same province	29	19	10	8	39	14
Same country, other province	15	10	13	11	28	10
Same country, exact place not indicated	8	5	5	4	13	5
Other country	19	12	12	10	31	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>100</b>

TABLE 2.4 Indication of preferred place of residence in 15 years Age 18-23/Age 24-30/Total. Source: This research.

Place of residence	Answers per category (age 18-23)	%	Answers per category (age 24-30)	%	Total answers per category	%
Same as current place of residence	88	50	54	55	142	52
Same municipality	9	5	12	13	21	8
Same province	28	16	11	11	39	14
Same country, other province	22	12	6	6	28	10
Same country, exact place not indicated	8	5	5	5	13	5
Other country	21	12	10	10	31	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>100</b>

TABLE 2.5 Indication of preferred place of residence in 15 years Urban/Rural municipality/Total. Source: This research.

Place of residence	Answers per category (urban)	%	Answers per category (rural)	%	Total answers per category	%
Same as current place of residence	47	44	95	57	142	52
Same municipality	6	5	15	9	21	8
Same province	17	16	22	13	39	14
Same country, other province	18	17	10	6	28	10
Same country, exact place not indicated	4	4	9	5	13	5
Other country	15	14	16	10	31	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>100</b>

As Table 2.6 shows, rural areas close to a city seemed popular. Although only a few respondents considered themselves to be currently living in such locations, they appeared relatively often in their dreams for the future. Remote rural areas also appeared relatively often. This shows the popularity of areas outside settlements in dreams for the future. Among respondents, cities only appeared sometimes in their residential dreams. There are, however, some differences between categories of respondents. As Table 2.7 shows, male respondents are more oriented towards remote rural areas and rural villages than their female counterparts, who are more oriented towards rural areas close to a city. As Table 2.8 shows, respondents in the age group between 24 and 30 years old are more oriented towards remote rural areas and rural villages than their counterparts between 18 and 23 years old, who are more oriented towards rural areas close to a city and city areas.

TABLE 2.6 Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, all respondents. Source: This research.

Residential environment	Current residential environment	Preferred residential environment in 15 years	Difference in %
Remote rural area	31	50	+61%
Rural village	146	87	-40%
Rural area close to a city	8	74	+825%
Suburb in a city area	19	23	+21%
City area, outside the city centre	50	28	-44%
City centre	20	12	-40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>+0%</b>

TABLE 2.7 Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, female/male. Source: This research.

Residential environment	Current residential environment (female)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (female)	Difference in % (female)	Current residential environment (male)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (male)	Difference in % (male)
Remote rural area	16	22	+38%	15	28	+87%
Rural village	78	41	-47%	68	46	-32%
Rural area close to a city	4	52	+1200%	4	22	+450%
Suburb in a city area	11	11	+0%	8	12	+50%
City area, outside the city centre	34	21	-38%	16	7	-56%
City centre	10	6	-40%	10	6	-40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>+0%</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>+0%</b>

TABLE 2.8 Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, age 18-23/age 24-30. Source: This research.

Residential environment	Current residential environment (age 18-23)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (age 18-23)	Difference in % (age 18-23)	Current residential environment (age 24-30)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (age 24-30)	Difference in % (age 24-30)
Remote rural area	23	32	+39%	8	18	+125%
Rural village	94	48	-49%	52	39	-25%
Rural area close to a city	4	49	+1125%	4	25	+525%
Suburb in a city area	15	18	+20%	4	5	+25%
City area, outside the city centre	29	20	-31%	21	8	-62%
City centre	11	9	-18%	9	3	-67%
<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>+0%</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>+0%</b>

Table 2.9 shows the differences in preferred residential environments in fifteen years between respondents who live in urban and rural municipalities. Interestingly, more respondents who live in urban environments prefer rural environments than vice versa. Areas outside settlements are popular among both groups of respondents. It is important to note here that these results are not representative and reflect small groups of respondents. Nonetheless, their dreams of the future have relevance. Therefore, the rest of this article focuses on the qualitative content of the dreams of the future.

TABLE 2.9 Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, urban/rural municipality. Source: This research.

Residential environment	Current residential environment (urban)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (urban)	Difference in % (urban)	Current residential environment (rural)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (rural)	Difference in % (rural)
Remote rural area	2	10	+400%	29	40	+38%
Rural village	19	12	-37%	127	75	-41%
Rural area close to a city	3	41	+1267%	5	33	+560%
Suburb in a city area	18	15	-17%	1	8	+700%
City area, outside the city centre	47	21	-55%	3	7	+133%
City centre	18	8	-56%	2	4	+100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>+0%</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>+0%</b>

This paper emphasises future rural residential dreams. Within that category of dreams, living space, nature, and quietness were the most critical factors. This can be seen in the most frequently mentioned words in the residential dream descriptions, such as 'restful', 'detached house', 'farm', 'garden', and 'space'. This also shows that rural residential dreams, to a certain extent, resemble elements of the 'Dutch rural idyll' described by Van Dam and colleagues (2002). Young adults also dreamed of living outside settlements in spacious buildings with private land. Furthermore, respondents tended to mention a specific rural village or area where they dreamed of living. They then explained why it was unique and precisely how they dreamed of living. The following quotations represent two typical rural dreams:

"In a village, but with sufficient amenities like a supermarket...Hopefully, lots of young families...The area is green...My ideal home is a rural farmhouse that has been preserved and offers lots of space and peace." – Survey respondent.

"Preferably on the outskirts of the village with large garden and barn, so that we live spatially but are quickly at the amenities in the village." – Survey respondent.

#### 2.4.2 Lifestyle dreams

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In the lifestyle dreams of respondents, there was a clear focus on leisure activities. Many respondents described their hobbies as important elements of their dreamed future lifestyle. There was also much focus on family and friends. This can be seen in the most frequently mentioned words in the lifestyle dream descriptions: 'hobby', 'family', 'friends', 'sport', and 'social'. Hence, having a family, specifically children, is an explicit element of the lifestyle dream. In many dreams, the focus on hobbies, family, and friends coincided with a specified residential dream. Respondents who mentioned family and friends in their lifestyle dreams generally also dreamed of living close to them. Moreover, some hobbies were mainly mentioned because of their social aspect or required a specific location. This also led to residential dreams being part of the lifestyle dreams description. This typical connection between lifestyle dreams and residential dreams is illustrated in the following two quotations:

"...My friends are an important aspect as well. I have many friends in this village, and we always have fun. That is why I want to stay close." – Survey respondent.

"I hope to do water sports and have the school and sufficient activities for the children nearby. Think of playgrounds and the opportunity to perform sports or hobbies in the village." – Survey respondent.

### 2.4.3 Career dreams

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The career dreams of respondents with a rural residential dream varied. Some career dreams focused on the same area as the residential dream. Respondents who wanted to live and work on a farm are a good example. The following quotation shows a good example:

**“I would like to be a dairy farmer. I am active in the agricultural sector now and in the future.” – Survey respondent.**

However, some career dreams focused on jobs that are traditionally located in urban areas. For example, jobs in management, marketing, and consultancy were mentioned. The public sector was also popular. This sector geographically varies between the more urban-centred national government, provincial institutions, and locally organised municipalities. Jobs in health and education, which also appeared and tend to be more locally organised, are also part of the public sector. Working in the latter examples was easier to combine with a rural residential dream. There was also a group of respondents who wanted to become entrepreneurs. As this involves more independence, this ambition may ease the combination of a rural residential and an urban career context. The most frequently mentioned words in the career dream descriptions were: ‘salary’, ‘enjoying work’, ‘nice job’, and ‘independence’. This shows that most respondents dreamed of having a job they enjoy, which leads to a good income. The following quotation represents this well:

**“A job at a governmental organisation...A good salary and nice colleagues are most important.” – Survey respondent.**

The combination of residential, lifestyle, and career dreams leads to a specific dream for the future, which varies for each person. For some respondents with a rural residential dream, their ambition for a local career and a lifestyle in which their current friends are important led to forming a clear dream for the future. For other respondents with a rural residential dream, more urban-oriented career dreams, or particular lifestyle dreams, led to a locational conflict arising within their dream for the future. This also appeared to be relevant to the foreseen obstacles.

#### 2.4.4 Foreseen obstacles

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The lack of career opportunities in rural areas was considered an obstacle to realising dreams for the future. Some respondents mentioned that the lack of available jobs in their sector in the rural area where they dreamed of living made it hard for them to realise their residential dreams. This applied especially to respondents with a career dream likely to be situated in a more urban context. Other respondents from this group viewed the travel time between the area of their residential dream and the probable location of their career dream as an obstacle. In Zeeland, some respondents also mentioned the lack of opportunities to study and future career development as an obstacle. Career-related obstacles appeared more in the more peripheral region of Zeeland than in the more central region of Midden-Noord-Brabant. This confirms the popularity of rural areas close to cities as places where rural residential dreams and urban career dreams can be combined (Kuhmonen et al., 2016; Auclair & Vanoni, 2017; González et al., 2021). The following quotation shows an example of a respondent with a rural residential dream who foresaw career-related obstacles impeding the realisation of this dream:

“There is currently no work in my sector in Zeeland. This is sad because now I am almost forced to live elsewhere.” – Survey respondent.

The relatively urban-oriented career dreams suggested that career-related obstacles in realising rural residential dreams were most prevalent. However, almost every respondent foresaw obtaining a house as an obstacle. The residential-related obstacles were by far the most critical that young adults foresaw in realising their rural residential dream. Residential-related obstacles centred around two issues. First and foremost, respondents mentioned housing availability in rural areas. They pointed to a need for more houses being built and planning policies that prioritised building in urban areas over building in and around rural villages. Second, the high costs of housing were mentioned. Although this problem was mentioned more often by young adults with an urban residential dream, those with a rural residential dream also saw it as problematic. Combining the availability and cost issues, respondents mentioned the lack of variety in the housing offer. They foresaw a need for smaller, affordable and rental houses in rural areas. The following quotations show a typical example of the obstacles foreseen by respondents with a rural residential dream:

“Whether it is to buy or to rent, there are no houses available in our village, or they are too expensive for a starter in the housing market.” – Survey respondent.

“...the shortage of “affordable” housing is an obstacle. This is already a problem, but if nothing is done about it within now and 15 years, many young people will be obliged to leave this area.” – Survey respondent.

Respondents were also asked to what extent they thought that Covid-19 had impacted their answers. This had no significant impact and the explanation of respondents showed that they could think beyond the pandemic’s effects. The following quotation represents this well:

“I assume that the effects of corona will no longer be felt in 2035, so I have not factored them into my answers.” – Survey respondent.

#### 2.4.5 **Stated life plans**

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The focus groups explored the influence of foreseen obstacles on stated life plans. Focus group participants explained that they would try to achieve their future residential dreams but adjust their residential choices if obstacles were insurmountable. If a dilemma between career and residential dreams existed, most participants preferred to pursue their career dreams. These career dreams were generally more urban-oriented than residential dreams. Therefore, some participants with a rural residential dream would only pursue this dream once career-related obstacles were removed. This becomes clear in the following quotation:

“In the end, I would opt for my dream job... I prefer to commute from my village. But if my work is too far away for that, I would leave this area.” – Focus group participant.

More urgently, some participants explained that they were planning to look for housing in urban areas if no more houses became available in the location of their rural residential dream. Some explained that they now live with their parents but that if suitable housing does not become available, they will ultimately feel forced to leave their rural area and move to an urban area. Participants also explained that many of their friends wanted to stay in the same place of residence. If this was not possible, they might move further away than just another town nearby. This result is important since residential issues were the most foreseen obstacle, and young adults are at a life stage where moving houses is likely in the upcoming fifteen years (Nivalainen, 2004). The following quotation explains this position well:

“If I can’t find a home in this area, ‘I will just go to the big city. Surely something can be found there.” – Focus group participant.

Participants argued that they changed their life plans once young adults left an area and were less likely to return. This was because they would build a life elsewhere. Participants explained that the lack of available housing would negatively impact the population development of rural areas in the short and long term.

Based on these results, the stated life plans of the respondents were indeed more urban-oriented than their dreams for the future. This relates to the obstacles they foresaw in realising rural residential dreams. Surprisingly, the lack of available housing in rural areas was the most critical factor influencing stated life plans and making them more urban-oriented. As expected, career-related obstacles also played a role in this process.

## 2.5 Discussion and conclusion

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This paper explored young Dutch adults’ dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles and how these obstacles influence their stated life plans. Most survey respondents dreamed of staying within, or close to, their current place of residence. This was especially the case for male respondents and respondents who reside in rural municipalities. Rural areas close to a city were especially popular as a preferred residential environment in fifteen years, especially among female respondents, respondents aged 18–23 and respondents who reside in an urban municipality. Male respondents, respondents aged 24–30 and respondents who reside in a rural municipality more often have rural villages and remote rural areas as a preferred residential environment in fifteen years. The lifestyle dreams of the respondents were often connected to their residential dreams, with access to leisure activities, family, and friends being mentioned. The career dreams varied but tended to be more urban-oriented than the residential dreams.

The most foreseen obstacles by respondents with a rural residential dream were the lack of available housing and, albeit to a lesser extent, career opportunities in the rural area they dreamed of living. These foreseen obstacles also influenced the stated life plans of focus group participants. They described how the lack of housing and career opportunities in rural areas led them to develop more urban-oriented life

plans. This was further strengthened by the focus group participants' preference to let their more urban-oriented career dreams ultimately prevail over their rural residential dream. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic was not perceived by most survey respondents to have impacted their answers.

These results partly support earlier research outcomes. The dreams to stay close to the current location and rural residential dreams confirm the emerging trend that Stockdale and Haartsen (2018) pointed out: young adults increasingly want to stay in rural areas. The importance of lifestyle aspects in the attractiveness of rural areas was already shown by Rérat (2014) and Cook and Cuervo (2020). Also, the perception of most survey respondents that Covid-19 had not impacted their answers suggests that they can engage in serious life planning and that their dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles were indeed focusing on the long term. This shows the value of research into life plans, which Anderson and colleagues (2005) and Brooks and Everett (2008) also pointed out, and of the future dreams research as defined by Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016).

A less expected outcome was the lack of housing availability as the most foreseen obstacle to realise future rural residential dreams. Earlier research suggested a lack of career opportunities would be the most foreseen obstacle (Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017). However, this research rather supports the suggestion of McKee and colleagues (2017) that the need for more appropriate housing is an underestimated reason why young adults might leave rural areas. The strong appearance of this obstacle could be related to the location of Dutch rural areas, which are closer to urban job markets than most European rural areas. Auclair and Vanoni (2017) and González and colleagues suggested that rural areas closer to cities can better maintain young adults.

There are some limitations to the research on which this paper is based. The first limitation is that changing dreams for the future or unforeseen obstacles may influence the eventual choices of research participants. This means that dreams for the future and stated life plans will not necessarily occur. However, earlier research suggests they have some predictive value (Anderson et al., 2005; Brooks & Everett, 2008).

A second limitation is that there might have been a bias in the sample of survey respondents and focus group participants. The survey respondents were younger and lived more rural than the average population in their region. Besides that, young adults more interested in the research topic were likelier to have participated. This could have resulted in an unrepresentative set of results. Moreover, the number of focus group participants is limited compared to the number of survey respondents.

In any event, the research participants' dreams, obstacles, and stated life plans exist and influence the regions where they live or dream to live. Although this paper cannot make quantitative claims, it qualitatively shows how foreseen obstacles influence the stated life plans of young Dutch adults, especially those with a rural residential dream.

A final limitation may be the research approach through dreams for the future. This is a relatively new angle to investigate urban-rural migration trends and has yet to be established as an alternative to more classical push-pull models of analysing migration between rural and urban areas (Gollin et al., 2002; Davis & Henderson, 2003). However, the exploratory foresight analysis in this paper shows that urban push and urban pull factors do not always align with the dreams for the future of young adults.

The effects of foreseen obstacles on the stated life plans of young adults with a rural residential dream have policy implications. Removing foreseen obstacles to realising rural residential dreams, such as the lack of housing availability and career opportunities, could enable the fulfilment of the dreams for the future of young adults. However, removing obstacles is not always possible. The dreams of living in larger houses outside settlements contradict Dutch policies that focus on the densification of settlements (Broitman & Koomen, 2020). Moreover, policymakers will balance the dreams of young adults with other existing spatial claims like infrastructure, agriculture, nature, and energy production (RLI, 2021). Removing foreseen obstacles does not necessarily require governmental intervention. For example, the increase in remote work may remove career-related obstacles. De Vos and colleagues (2018) show that for each additional day per week that people work from home, they will, on average, live further away from their work. Although working remotely is impossible in some sectors, a general increase in working remotely, caused by the societal lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, may partly remove the career-related obstacles that young adults with a rural residential dream foresee.

Future research could focus on four topics. First, longitudinal research into dreams for the future, stated life plans, and eventual life choices could investigate the predictive value of dreams for the future and life plans research. This can also compare this foresight analysis to classical push/pull models. Second, the role of foreseen obstacles in the stated life plans of young adults with an urban residential dream could be investigated. It would be interesting to see how these obstacles influence their life plans, primarily if foreseen obstacles differ from those of young adults with a rural residential dream. Third, quantitative research among a representative population sample could test the qualitative outcomes of this paper. Fourth, a repeat of this research in a country with more peripheral rural areas could

test the context-dependency of the Dutch results in this paper. This would also reveal if residential-related obstacles appear as important in other countries. This research agenda would support the development of a better understanding of the rural dreams of young adults and help these dreams to come true.

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# 3 Reinventing a rural area

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## A case study into cultural festivals in Oldambt, The Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** The Oldambt area, in the northeast of the Netherlands, has recently suffered from depopulation and a negative image. However, four high-quality cultural festivals have been developed in or moved towards the area during the last decade. The festivals have different organisational models. This paper assesses how they contribute to rural regeneration through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders around the festivals and local youth. It adds to the existing literature by introducing the concept of rural regeneration, stemming from neo-endogenous rural development, into festival research and by doing multiple case studies in one area. The paper investigates the festivals' local legitimacy, rootedness, and ability to create interconnectedness. The findings suggest that the festivals are locally supported, use local resources, and benefit the area, notwithstanding their organisational model. The festivals also help to establish networks within and outside of Oldambt, and there is thus a positive effect on regeneration. The recent more positive developments in Oldambt may be related to the organisation of the festivals.

**KEYWORDS** Festivals; Regeneration; Cultural capital; Community development; Rural areas; The Netherlands

## 3.1 Introduction

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Cultural festivals in rural areas are increasingly considered to counter the narrative of rural decline. For a long time, rural areas seemed neglected in cultural policies and vice versa (Bell & Jayne, 2010), despite the positive effects that arts and culture can have on rural development (Duxbury & Campbell, 2011). There is a rapid increase in cultural festivals in rural areas, which can be related to the broader trend of festivalisation (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Simultaneously, there is emergent literature on the social and economic importance of rural festivals. This has focused on network performativity (Fisker et al., 2021); the economic effects (Chabra et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010; Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018); and the creation of cultural capital (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). Knowledge about the specific contribution of cultural festivals to network building, economic development and cultural capital development is helpful when assessing their contribution to the rural areas in which they are organised.

The contribution of cultural festivals in rural areas to rural development, revitalisation, and resilience of rural communities has also been explicitly investigated. Research has focused on the development of community leadership through festivals (Davies, 2015), the role of festival assemblers in creating rural assets (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020), and the role of festivals in stimulating inward migration and enhancing community resilience (Qu & Cheer, 2021). Mahon and Hyyryläinen (2019) analysed the contribution of different types of festivals to rural development and resilience by comparing a community-led festival and a more entrepreneurial-oriented festival. These studies are valuable as they relate cultural festivals' social and economic effects to the benefits for rural areas and their inhabitants.

However, despite the generally positive findings in earlier research, organising cultural festivals in rural areas may only sometimes benefit local communities. Eusébio and colleagues (2017) describe cultural festivals as a consumptive way to use the countryside. Marsden (1999) explained that the countryside has been transforming from a place for production to a place for consumption and leisure. If cultural festivals in the countryside mainly attract well-off urban citizens without benefiting local citizens, the countryside may be gentrified against the interests of local citizens (Nemes & Tomay, 2022). By involving local citizens, festivals may be likelier to support the broader development of rural areas. This relates to earlier debates on exogenous and (neo-)endogenous rural development (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). Although earlier studies show how cultural festivals can support rural development, they do not use the concept of rural regeneration. This concept focuses on transforming and re-making rural areas in response to their decline

(Murtagh et al., 2020, p.18). More concretely, rural regeneration implies place-based developments that are helpful for local citizens (Murtagh et al., 2020, p.22). Therefore, the concept may be a helpful lens to see who benefits from the festivals.

This paper aims to find if the type of festival organisation matters for the community benefits of cultural festivals in rural areas. This can be investigated through case study research of multiple festivals in one area. The paper, therefore, asks the following research question: *How do stakeholders around four cultural festivals in Oldambt, the Netherlands, assess the contribution of the festivals to rural regeneration in this area?* The Oldambt municipality in the Northeast of the Netherlands hosts multiple high-quality cultural events founded or moved there in the past decade. The most important examples are Festival Hongerige Wolf, Grasnapsky, Pura Vida and Waterbei. The emergence of these festivals seems surprising, given the long-term negative reputation of this post-industrial rural area (Boedeltje, 2010). The festival organisers, visitors and artists can often be considered newcomers. Goodwin-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones (2022) have shown that rural newcomers can help reinvent and strengthen rural areas' cultural capital. This paper assesses two critical dimensions of rural regeneration: the local legitimacy and rootedness of the festivals and their ability to create interconnectedness within and outside the area (Murtagh et al., 2021). Knowledge of these topics helps to assess their contribution to the Oldambt area critically and gives an impression about whether the organisational model impacts who benefits from the festivals.

The paper adds to the existing literature in two ways. First, it addresses the concept of rural regeneration in the context of cultural festivals, which adds to the more widely used concept of rural development. Second, it investigates multiple cultural festivals in one rural area. Earlier research into rural festivals investigated individual festivals or festivals in different regions, leading to a need for comparative analysis within the same area. The uniqueness of the organisation of multiple festivals in Oldambt enables comparing different organisation models. The research is based on 19 qualitative interviews with stakeholders around the festivals and local youth and was conducted in 2021. During this period, Covid-19 posed a risk to the cultural sector in urban and rural contexts (Janizweska et al., 2021). Given the qualitative nature of this research, the results show the perspective of relevant stakeholders on the situation in Oldambt. The results may also suggest how rural festivals contribute to rural regeneration in other situations.

In what follows, section 3.2 discusses previous research on rural regeneration and cultural festivals to define rural regeneration in this context. Section 3.3, about method and context, describes the specificities and social history of the Oldambt area and explains the background and the organisational differences between the

festivals. Then, section 3.4 provides the results, after which section 3.5 provides a discussion and conclusion about the contribution of the four festivals in Oldambt towards rural regeneration.

## 3.2 Rural regeneration and cultural festivals

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This section assesses existing literature on rural regeneration and the contribution of cultural festivals in this regard. To begin with, it defines rural regeneration in the context of cultural festivals. Pemberton (2019) explains that rural regeneration needs to be adequately defined and distinguished from rural development. In the urban context, regeneration seeks lasting improvements to a state of decline (Roberts & Sykes, 2000). This paper uses Murtagh and colleagues' (2020, p.18) definition that rural regeneration 'implies a transition process and more positive reinvention or revival. It must respond to the need to re-make, to transform a rural area in response to decline.' As it seeks to respond to a specific situation of decline, rural regeneration is place-based and may differ per location (Murtagh et al., 2020). In cultural festivals, rural regeneration implies particular attention to cultural capital and power distribution between organisers and communities (Mahon & Hyyryläinen, 2019). This means that rural festivals should have local legitimacy, use local resources, create local benefits, and help strengthen networks in rural areas by creating interconnectedness (Murtagh et al., 2021). This paper assesses how the investigated festivals contribute to rural regeneration in Oldambt and which organisational mode supports this.

This paper relates to the exogenous and (neo-)endogenous rural development debate (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). Exogenous rural development considers the countryside a place of production for the urban economy developed through top-down policies and external influences. In contrast, endogenous rural development considers the countryside a place with diverse service economies developed through bottom-up local initiatives and internal influences. Neo-endogenous rural development sees the countryside as a mosaic of re-emerging productivist functions and consumerist uses developed through bottom-up and top-down policies that balance local needs (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019, p.164). External and internal influences can support rural development. This is strengthened if they cooperate (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019).

The concept of rural regeneration is based on this neo-endogenous outlook on rural development (Murtagh et al., 2020). In the case of cultural festivals, it is interesting to see how top-down and bottom-up initiatives function and who eventually benefits from them. Figure 3.1 shows which dimensions of rural regeneration are used for this paper. The rest of this section will address the importance of these dimensions when assessing rural festivals and which organisational mode supports rural regeneration.

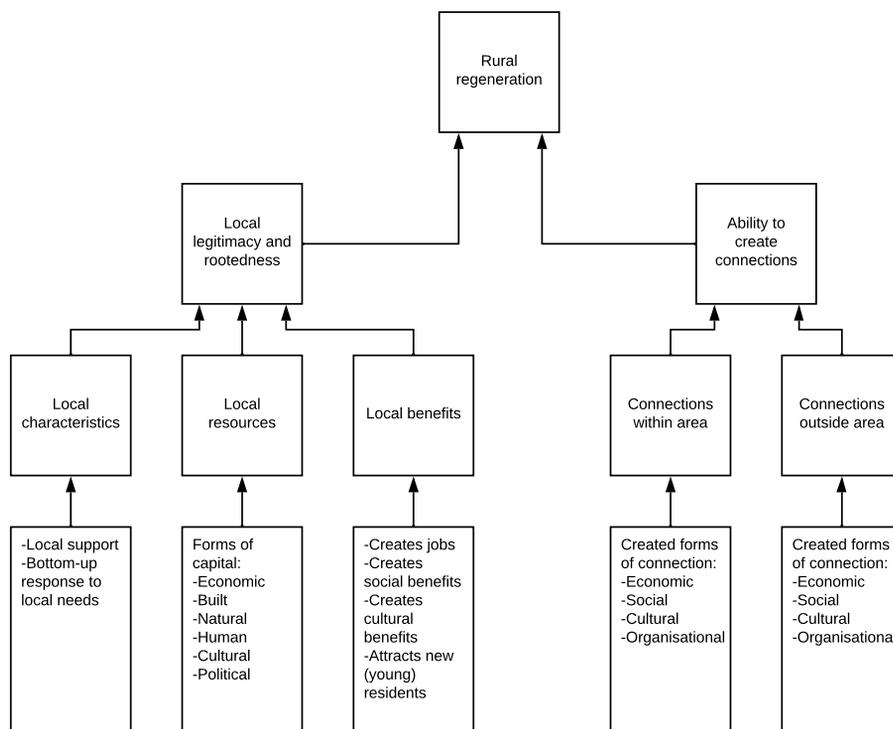


FIG. 3.1 Dimensions of rural regeneration in assessing the contribution of cultural festivals. Source: Author, based on Murtagh and colleagues (Murtagh et al., 2021).

### 3.2.1 Local legitimacy and rootedness

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Local legitimacy and rootedness are critical dimensions of rural practice's contribution to regeneration. As Figure 3.1 shows, they are conceptualised together as supportive local characteristics, the local resources that festivals use, and the local benefits they contribute to. Powe and colleagues (2015) did case study research on adequate governmental support for rural regeneration. They showed that processes must be locally led and bottom-up rather than top-down governmental initiatives to achieve long-term rural regeneration (Powe et al., 2015). Murtagh and colleagues (2021) explain that supportive local characteristics are created when a practice responds to local needs. As European rural areas are diverse, local factors can form the basis of local legitimacy and rootedness (Murtagh et al., 2021). This local legitimacy is fundamental when rural newcomers or outsiders are involved, as Schucksmith (2010) illustrates with examples from LEADER projects in northern Scotland. Therefore, local legitimacy is an essential pillar of rural regeneration.

By using multiple forms of capital, rural practices use local resources. Murtagh and colleagues (2021) describe that the local rootedness of a rural practice becomes higher when it uses local resources. Bourdieu (1986) has explained that resources can come in various forms of capital that help to create success. Actors can draw upon these forms of capital to regenerate a rural area (Bebbington et al., 2006). Figure 3.1 shows the forms of capital that this paper distinguishes as potentially contributing to festivals' local legitimacy and rootedness: economic, built, natural, human, cultural, and political capital. These are based on earlier research into forms of capital in rural contexts. Bebbington and colleagues (2006) qualitatively analysed rural development in Indonesia and found that natural, human, financial, physical, cultural and social capital are all significant. Murtagh and colleagues (2021) also add political capital and replace physical and financial capital with built and economic capital, respectively. Duxbury and colleagues (2020) qualitatively analysed Portuguese initiatives for creative tourism. They found that more locally rooted festivals are likelier to align with local interests and create local benefits (Duxbury et al., 2020). When festivals use multiple forms of capital drawn from local resources, they are more likely to regenerate a rural area. Therefore, local resources are another essential pillar of rural regeneration.

To contribute to rural regeneration, practices should also benefit the local area where they are held. Based on a qualitative case study in rural Wales, Goodwin-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones (2022) show that newcomers can identify aspects of a rural area and transform these into cultural benefits. By doing so, they use local resources and benefit the area (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022). This still leaves the question of who benefits.

Rural festival research provides ample support for the benefits to individuals and areas. Based on observations and interviews, Rossetti and Quinn (2021) show how two rural literary festivals enhance the cultural capital of their visitors. As these visitors often come from the area, these cultural benefits are going to rural citizens. Kwiatkowski and colleagues (2020) quantitatively surveyed organisers, visitors and local citizens around rural festivals in Norway and Denmark. They found that the festivals help to sustain, create, and reinvent assets in rural areas by creating jobs for local citizens and social benefits for visitors and community members. This could also help to counter the outmigration of young people (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Furthermore, Qu and Cheer (2021) held semi-structured interviews and a quantitative survey among stakeholders of a Japanese bottom-up organised festival in a rural area. They concluded that the festival stimulates the inward migration of talented people. This may lead to the risk of rural gentrification. However, Qu and Cheer (2021) also emphasise that rural festivals enhance community resilience. These optimistic expectations of the benefits of cultural festivals for rural areas rely on the involvement of local citizens. Eusébio and colleagues (2017) warn that festival visitors and organisers can consume the countryside rather than develop it. As Figure 3.1 shows, rural practices can benefit areas by creating jobs, social benefits for the community, cultural benefits, or attracting new and young residents (Murtagh et al., 2021). Local benefits are an essential pillar of rural regeneration through festivals if this is realised.

There are differing views on the legitimacy and rootedness of rural festivals. Reid (2011) investigated three Australian rural festivals through in-depth stakeholder interviews. She explains that potential commercial interests may clash with community interests. After a case study on another Australian rural festival, Mair and Duffy (2018) note that there is a risk that only some people in the community benefit from the organisation of such events. The benefits in terms of capital development may be limited to festival organisers. When those organisers come from the local community, the benefits for the rural area may be more extensive. The skills developed during the organisation help the community throughout the year (Mair & Duffy, 2018). Mahon and Hyryläinen (2019) did comparative research on an Irish community-oriented rural festival and a Finnish entrepreneurial-oriented rural festival. They conclude that the Irish festival, with a higher local legitimacy, is better at involving local people than the Finnish festival, and the latter is better at financially sustaining itself (Mahon & Hyryläinen, 2019). This contrasts with the earlier analysis of Gibson and colleagues (2010). They surveyed organisers of rural festivals and concluded that they are hardly lucrative but produce direct and indirect economic benefits. This debate questions the extent to which communities benefit from rural festivals. And if the organisation model matters for this.

In the case of Oldambt, the existing theory suggests that community-led, bottom-up festivals are better able than top-down festivals that are private-led or government-led in involving local people. A wider part of the community legitimises them. Community-led festivals are also likelier to use local resources and create local benefits. The benefits of private- or government-led festivals may, however, depend on the role of newcomers, who can also help to reinvent and regenerate rural areas (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022).

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### 3.2.2 **Interconnectedness**

Interconnectedness is another critical dimension of rural practice contributing to rural regeneration. Figure 3.1 shows that it is conceptualised as the connections that festivals create within and outside the area. These can be economic, social, cultural, and organisational connections. Murtagh and colleagues (2021) explain that newly created networks within and outside the area can help to tap new resources and ideas. Murdoch (2000) argues that linkages of rural spaces into more general and non-agricultural processes of economic change should be part of rural development and policies. The horizontal networks in this situation are considered part of endogenous rural development. In contrast, the vertical networks that were the norm in the agri-food industry are part of exogenous rural development (Murdoch, 2000, p.416). Murdoch (2000) also acknowledges that studying networks may help to overcome the binary debate between exogenous and endogenous rural development. The concept of neo-endogenous rural development, where rural regeneration stems from, also seeks to do this. After stakeholder interviews at multiple European innovative projects in rural areas, Esparcia (2014) finds that networks which combine local and tacit knowledge with more explicit expert knowledge make these projects more successful. The network of actors and local institutional support are both critical elements for the success of projects (Esparcia, 2014, p.11). In addition, more robust networks are known to increase mutual recognition of social aspects (Burt et al., 2013). The networks that result from increased economic, social, cultural, and organisational connections, both within and outside Oldambt, can thus strengthen the ability of the area to create links. This will help to regenerate the area.

There is also attention to the role of interconnectedness within research on events. Richards (2021) did stakeholder interviews around the cooperation of individual events in a Dutch city to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of a famous painter. He found that the existing cooperation helped generate social and cultural connections (Richards, 2021). Edwards (2012) assessed the cultural history of an Australian rural festival and found that it increased the rural area's community capacity and

created economic connections. The ethnographic research by Fontefrancesco (2018) explains how gastronomic festivals in rural Italy can be understood as a local community response to social and political marginalisation. Fisker and colleagues (2021) analysed six community-led rural festivals in Denmark through a survey among the organisers, participant observation, and stakeholder interviews. They explained that the organisers could become critical nodes in networks of the themes of their festivals, hence strengthening organisational connections. Davies (2015) did longitudinal research among local organisers of an Australian rural festival and found that its volunteers later developed community leadership roles in support of the interests of this area. Based on previous literature, the festivals in Oldambt are expected to create networks within and outside the area and support rural regeneration.

### 3.3 **Methods and context of the study**

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This paper is based on an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project in which different promising practices in rural areas which may contribute to rural regeneration have been studied. Oldambt is a peripheral and relatively rural municipality in the Groningen province, in the Northeast of the Netherlands. Over the past decades, the region of eastern Groningen has gone through relative economic decline, with relatively high unemployment rates (Thissen et al., 2010). Oldambt is a post-industrial rural area with an agricultural history, during which it had huge grain farms and a straw cardboard industry (Boedeltje, 2010; Westerman, 2018). Its farmers became wealthy during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and prospered enormously during the creation of the CAP. The grain production also led to the development of the local straw cardboard industry, a rest product of grain (Westerman, 2018). Figure 3.2 shows an example of an abandoned factory. The wealth creation in Oldambt coincided with class differences. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1970s, Oldambt farmers were the wealthiest in the country. They lived in manors rather than farms. Meanwhile, the working class in Oldambt, existing of land labourers and factory workers, was relatively poor. With this social struggle, Oldambt also has a history of left-wing politics. It was a stronghold for the Dutch Communist Party (Keesman, 2013). The municipal council still has some communist councillors, rare in the Netherlands.



**FIG. 3.2** Former straw cardboard factory in Scheemda, Oldambt; location of Grasnepolsky. Source: Author.

Although the golden era of the wealthy grain farms is long gone, and the straw cardboard industry has disappeared, the history of Oldambt is still visible in the landscape. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 show that it still has former factory buildings and large (former) grain manors. The emptiness and sometimes deterioration of these buildings contributed to a negative reputation for the area (Boedeltje, 2010; Thissen et al., 2010). A local saying even represents this view: 'It was nothing, it is nothing, and it will be nothing' (Respondent [R]3, R8, R9, R11).



FIG. 3.3 Typical grain manor in Beerta, Oldambt. Source: Author.

Table 3.1 shows how the Oldambt municipality compares to the rest of the Netherlands regarding population, income, social benefits, and education level. It shows that the population is relatively old. The level of education and household income in the municipality and the relatively high reliance on benefits can be related to the decline of its former economic strongholds and the long-term backlogs for the local working class (Westerman, 2018).

TABLE 3.1 Data on the Netherlands and Oldambt. Source: Statistics Netherlands (2020); Statistics Netherlands (2022).

	The Netherlands (2020)	Oldambt municipality (2020)
Number of inhabitants	17,407,585	38,209
0-20 years old	21.7%	19.3%
20-65 years old	58.8%	55.8%
65+ years old	19.5%	24.9%
Inhabitants per km <sup>2</sup>	517	169
10-year population growth	+5,0%	-3,2%
Average household income	€47.500	€39.400
People on unemployment benefits (without pensioners)	9.1%	12.2%
Level of education of population aged 15-75:	(2019 percentages)	(2019 percentages)
Low	28.4%	36.2%
Mid	41.4%	47.4%
High	30.2%	16.4%

Oldambt has seen both top-down and bottom-up strategies to regenerate the area. In the late 1980s, when grain production became less profitable, a local architect and public servant devised a top-down plan to redevelop relatively unproductive grainfields in Oldambt as the Blauwestad project (Blauwestad, 2020; Meeus et al., 1990). An 800 hectares lake would serve as a water basin, a location for water recreation, partly as a nature reserve and partly as an attractive residential location. This should attract wealthy pensioners from elsewhere in the Netherlands to Oldambt (Westerman, 2018). Blauwestad was developed in the 2000s. However, the project failed to achieve its initial ambitions regarding selling building plots. To reduce financial damage, Groningen province took responsibility for the future of Blauwestad in 2010. As a result, the provincial government has a very active role in Oldambt. Between 2010 and 2013, the mirage that many wealthy pensioners would come to Blauwestad was abandoned, and the province allowed the construction of cheaper housing (Provincie Groningen, 2013). This made it easier to build a house in Blauwestad for people from the Groningen province (Van den Berg, 2015). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the sale of building plots by the top-down project increased dramatically (Grol, 2020). Figure 3.4 gives an impression of Blauwestad.



FIG. 3.4 The main settlement of the Blauwestad project, Oldambt, is the location of Pura Vida. Source: Author.

Organising cultural festivals with high community involvement is a more bottom-up strategy to create rural regeneration, especially given the limited top-down support for cultural events in Dutch rural areas. In the Netherlands, there is a clear focus on central and urban areas in the national funding for the cultural sector, with most subsidies going to cities in the central Randstad area. The small amount of federal funding directed towards Groningen province mostly goes to institutions and events in Groningen city (Fonds Podiumkunsten, 2021). The spatially unjust distribution of financing for the cultural sector has caused opposition from politicians from more peripheral and rural provinces and those working in the cultural sector (Rijsberman et al., 2020; Van Ruiten, 2020). This distribution makes it more difficult for rural areas to profit from the opportunities that rural cultural festivals could create in terms of liveability, reputation, and economic strength (Fisker et al., 2021).

Within this context, Oldambt hosts four high-level cultural events, which show a more bottom-up strategy to regenerate the area, and which all relate to a certain extent to the local context of Oldambt. This might be surprising, given the demographic and socio-economic situation in the municipality, as shown in Table 3.1. Based on the assessment framework used to select promising practices of rural regeneration (Murtagh et al., 2021), the organisation of multiple high-level cultural events in Oldambt was considered promising. Figure 3.5 shows a map of the Oldambt area and the four investigated festivals' locations.



FIG. 3.5 The Oldambt festivals on a map. Source: Author, based on Mapscreator (2023).

The four festivals each have a specific background that makes them interesting to investigate. Festival Hongerige Wolf is a community-led music, dance, theatre, film, visual arts, and literature festival organised in the small and peripheral village of Hongerige Wolf. It was first organised by a former inhabitant who wanted to create a connection between the people from Hongerige Wolf and her friends from Amsterdam, where she had moved. Waterbei is a community-led street theatre festival in Winschoten, the main town of Oldambt. It was founded by citizens in 2010, in a period of austerity policies, when the local theatre had temporarily closed. Grasnapolsky is a private-led festival with alternative music, art, and expeditions

to the surroundings. It is organised in the former straw cardboard factory ‘The Future’ (see Figure 3.2). The festival seeks to connect culture, landscapes, and local stories. Initially, it was organised elsewhere in the Netherlands. In 2019, it moved to Oldambt. Earlier research in the Italian context suggests that reusing a former factory as a festival location may be a helpful way to preserve this cultural heritage (Sardaro et al., 2021). Pura Vida is a government-led annual concert by the North Netherlands Orchestra, played on a pontoon in the Oldambt lake in Blauwestad. Groningen province started organising this entry-free event to promote Blauwestad and connect new inhabitants with local communities. Given the prominent role of the government, it is a more top-down event than the other festivals.

Table 3.2 summarises the main aspects and the organisation model of each festival. It is vital to note the difference in organisation models. The local communities have a more substantial role in Hongerige Wolf and Waterbei than Grasnapsky and Pura Vida. Based on the literature, the first two festivals are expected to have more local legitimacy, use more local resources, and have more extensive local benefits.

TABLE 3.2 Main aspects of Oldambt festivals. Source: Author. .

	Hongerige Wolf	Waterbei	Grasnapsky	Pura Vida
<b>Organisation model</b>	Community-led (foundation)	Community-led (foundation)	Private-led (foundation)	Government-led
<b>Content</b>	Music, dance, theatre, film, visual arts & literature	Street theatre	Alternative music, art, expeditions into surroundings	Music concert
<b>Year established</b>	2011	2010	2019 (in this location)	2008
<b>Duration</b>	3 days	2 days	3 days	1 day
<b>Entry</b>	Paid	Free	Paid	Free
<b>No. of visitors/season</b>	6.000 (2022)	6.000 (2019)	1.700 (2019)	13.000 (2019)

This paper uses semi-structured interviews with stakeholders to investigate the contribution of the above-described festivals to rural regeneration. The qualitative data are not generalisable, but the perspective of relevant stakeholders leads to detailed and insightful information that may be valuable to consider when studying other cases (Queirós et al., 2017). In the case of the Oldambt festivals, stakeholders’ views could explain how the festivals contributed to rural regeneration. However, this depends on whether the selected group of respondents avoids biases (Queirós et al., 2016). Respondents were selected by searching the festival websites and local media, leading to an initial list of 12 stakeholders. Consequently, the snowball method was used to find further relevant stakeholders. This led to a list

of 20 potential interviewees. From this group, 17 people were interviewed. The stakeholders interviewed include festival organisers, civil servants, politicians, local entrepreneurs, citizens, and one regional journalist. Two additional interviews were held to include young people's voices better. These interviewees were approached via a vocational school in Oldambt. In total, 19 semi-structured interviews were held (see Appendix I). Appendix II provides further anonymised details about the background of the respondents. Although most respondents were optimistic about the festivals' contribution to rural regeneration, some were expected to have a neutral or more critical view. Where possible, the respondents' perspectives have been verified in policy documents and other festival information.

The research took place between February and May 2021. As the study occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were held online. The interview guide consisted of topics relating to rural regeneration, such as the background, practical aspects and impact of the Oldambt festivals, the economic success, the role of youth, conflicts and challenges, relations with the local community and the role of multiple tiers of government in supporting the festivals. The acquired data were all in Dutch, and the author has translated quotations in this paper. The data were analysed through directed content analysis. In this type of analysis, codes are based on academic literature and can be altered during the findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The research analysis for this paper focused on the local legitimacy and rootedness of the festivals and their ability to create interconnectedness in the Oldambt area. Finally, the recent developments around the festivals were assessed.

## 3.4 Results

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### 3.4.1 Local legitimacy and rootedness of the Oldambt festivals

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The investigated festivals have differing relationships with the local community due to their different backgrounds, visitor groups and the amount of direct impact on local communities. A semi-professional organisation, mainly consisting of volunteers from the area, organises Festival Hongerige Wolf. According to its organisers, the festival relies on local community support and cooperation because it is organised in and around the settlement of Hongerige Wolf (R1, R2, R10). It can only be organised if this community generally supports the festival. Therefore, the festival organisers aim to maintain a good relationship with Hongerige Wolf citizens. For example, they organise discussion evenings in the village. The organisation tries to solve the issue if people disagree with festival elements. Some villagers nevertheless oppose the festival. They deliberately chose to live in the quiet and peripheral location of Hongerige Wolf and wanted to avoid a festival organised around their house (R1, R2, R7, R10). Still, most Hongerige Wolf citizens are generally supportive and proud of their festival. One of the festival organisers explains this situation well:

“Every year, we do our utmost best with all residents. Some need more attention than others. We try to ensure that every concern gets attention. Some people are against the festival, even if it’s just a handful—less than 20%. Most local citizens support this festival.” – R2.

For the other festivals, the organisational situation is more straightforward. Waterbei is organised in the town centre of Winschoten by local volunteers. Despite being busier during the festival than at other moments, this location is designed to host many visitors. A festival organiser, a local politician, a local entrepreneur and local youth all explain that the entry-free festival attracts local citizens and people from elsewhere. Visitors are interested in this high-quality offer of street theatre (R6, R8, R14, R18, R19).

Grasnapolsky, organised in the former straw cardboard factory in Scheemda, is a relatively new festival. A professional organisation of rural newcomers organises the festival (R4, R5, R7). According to its organiser, a local entrepreneur and a civil servant, the festival involves local citizens, entrepreneurs, and institutions. For example, Grasnapolsky organises expeditions to local attractions for its visitors (R8, R12, R13, R14, R17). The festival has not yet encountered opposition from local

citizens, who are optimistic about an event in De Toekomst (R4, R5, R17). Given its recent move towards Oldambt, local citizens only sometimes know Grasnapolsky. Likewise, the Oldambt area is new to most festival visitors, who mainly come from elsewhere (R4, R16, R18, R19; Grasnapolsky, 2021).

The Groningen province organises Pura Vida in a unique location within the Blauwestad area. According to some respondents and media, the festival has helped to attract new residents to Blauwestad (R3, R7, R11, R17; Grimmon, 2022). According to local youth, their generation is less interested in Pura Vida than older people (R3, R18, R19). In recent editions, there have been few complaints about the festival's organisation. Local inhabitants explain that they like this event, which shows the beauty of the Blauwestad project (R8, R18, R19). A local entrepreneur, who does not economically benefit from the festival, describes the festival as follows:

**“There are about 20,000 people. Many with boats on the water. It's great...a goosebumps event. It is locally very positively regarded.” – R14.**

The festivals in Oldambt make use of local resources to a different extent. According to a local and provincial civil servant, all festivals use local political capital by finding governmental support and subsidies (R7, R13). Festival Hongerige Wolf also uses natural, economic, and human capital. A festival organiser and a local citizen explain that it celebrates the spacious and peripheral surroundings of the small village where it is organised and buys material from local companies (R7, R10). A local citizen explains how many of the inhabitants of Hongerige Wolf are involved in this:

**“Our neighbour has a family campsite during the festival. Some people sell books and antiques from their sheds. Someone nearby serves pastries and local food on her terrace. Another person makes soup and jams and sells them to visitors. So local citizens participate.” – R10.**

Waterbei uses existing human, cultural and economic capital in Winschoten. It is organised by local citizens involved in the cultural sector and supported by local entrepreneurs (R6, R14). Grasnapolsky mainly embraces the built and cultural capital of Oldambt by using the former straw cardboard factory De Toekomst. The organisers and owner of the location explain that this also enables Grasnapolsky to interest visitors in the unique social history of the area (R4, R5). Pura Vida is focused on the existing natural capital and is organised on Oldambt lake in Blauwestad (R3, R17). When considering the organisational model of the festivals, it stands out that the community-led festivals of Hongerige Wolf and Waterbei use a more comprehensive set of local resources than the private-led Grasnapolsky and government-led Pura Vida festival.

The festivals in Oldambt benefit the area in multiple ways. There are clear cultural benefits. During all the events, local citizens are confronted with ideas, people, and art forms that they would probably only come across during these festivals. A broad range of respondents argues that the festivals create a cultural clash between local inhabitants, newcomers, and visitors. This can lead to new ideas that strengthen the cultural offer in this peripheral area (R2, R8, R11, R16). Local citizens also start to see their area differently, which helps to develop cultural benefits and a sense of pride (R9, R10, R18, R19). A former Alderman of the municipality puts this as follows:

“We need other people from outside who come here to make us realise Oldambt’s uniqueness because many local inhabitants no longer see it. That you can do something with it... For example, someone took the risk to buy De Toekomst, which many people just wanted to demolish. Now, it has been completely renovated and hosts Grasnapolsky... Even when organised by others, the cultural events in the area make local citizens realise how unique Oldambt is.” – R8.

In other contexts, cultural festivals also tend to support the reinvention of rural areas (Duxbury et al., 2020; Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Especially Grasnapolsky and Festival Hongerige Wolf have an essential role in reinventing the area. A festival organiser of Grasnapolsky explains that it explicitly seeks to make its visitors from outside Oldambt familiar with the unique history of the building and the area in which it is organised (R4). The founder of Festival Hongerige Wolf explains that it was founded to introduce visitors from urban areas to the attractiveness of the vast landscapes of Oldambt (R1, R10). Therefore, the festivals help both local citizens and visitors reinvent the area.

The festivals also have economic benefits. With its cultural festivals, many new visitors came to Oldambt. Grasnapolsky surveyed their visitors in 2019 and found that 42% had never visited the area before, and 74% wanted to know more about Oldambt after seeing the festival (Grasnapolsky, 2021). According to local and regional politicians and festival organisers, visitors get to see the area because of the diverse offer of cultural events. This has direct and potential future touristic benefits (R1, R4, R8, R12, R17). Dutch rural areas could benefit from small-scale tourism (Raad voor de Leefomgeving en Infrastructuur, 2019). Measuring the effects on the local economy is difficult, but the festivals attract more tourists to Oldambt.

Given that the festivals’ budgets are limited, potential extra jobs and income streams for local people are created indirectly and temporarily. In addition, local civil servants argue that the festivals may be helping to attract new, but not young, residents to the area (R7, R17). Respondents think differently about the number of young people

interested in visiting the festivals, with young respondents being more enthusiastic (R8, R10, R18, R19). A young woman from Oldambt explains her enthusiasm for Festival Hongerige Wolf:

“I usually go there with friends. You come across everyone from the village and surroundings. Young and older people go. You don’t know those alternative people who come there. But these people are also really involved. Then you have a whole group of partying people standing there. You have no idea who they are, but it is fun to meet these people.” – R19.

All investigated festivals have forms of local legitimacy and rootedness, but there are differences. Festival Hongerige Wolf’s location within a normally quiet village leads to some local critiques, whereas other festivals are more enthusiastically supported. The community-led festivals of Hongerige Wolf and Waterbei use local resources more than Grasnapolsky and Pura Vida. However, all festivals’ local benefits are considerable. Significantly, Grasnapolsky and Festival Hongerige Wolf contribute to the Oldambt area’s reinvention by seeking contact with local people and their stories and making them realise the area’s uniqueness. The increase in cultural festivals, also when led by newcomers, thus helps to strengthen Oldambt. Rural newcomers’ vital role confirms that they are essential in increasing cultural capital in rural areas (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022). The local legitimacy of Grasnapolsky and its role in creating local benefits suggests that in the case of Oldambt, the theory-based expectation that community-led festivals use local resources and lead to more local benefits only holds for using local resources.

### 3.4.2 **Interconnectedness created by the Oldambt festivals**

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The festivals in Oldambt help to establish networks within the area. This is, first and foremost, the result of local people who meet and develop social connections during the events (R6, R19). But the festivals also strengthen organisational and cultural relationships within Oldambt. This opportunity is embraced through the Cultural platform Oldambt, which seeks to unite all organisations and people in the Oldambt cultural sector and foster cooperation (Cultuurplatform Oldambt, 2023). Members throughout the cultural sector are part of the network, ranging from professional festival organisers to local amateur choirs and citizens operating within the industry. A local cultural entrepreneur and a local citizen describe the platform as a place where knowledge is shared between people from the cultural sector, leading to improvements in the cultural field of Oldambt. The cultural platform organises workshops, such as professionalising event organisation or applying for funding.

Besides that, there are informal events where people can meet each other and create new ideas (R9, R10). Festival organisers and a local civil servant explain that the Oldambt municipality actively supports the Cultural platform (R2, R4, R7, R8).

By involving the festival organisers, the cultural sector in Oldambt can profit from their ideas and networks and, hence, become more robust. Some people and organisations actively embrace the Cultural platform to create economic, organisational, and cultural connections and improve their events and ideas. However, a festival organiser, civil servant and cultural entrepreneur mentioned that the platforms' limited budgets and lack of active participation of some stakeholders make it harder for the Cultural platform to reach its goals. There is more potential to create stronger connections within the Oldambt cultural sector (R3, R7, R9). This is explained as follows:

“ I have been running the Cultural platform for years, but do it for free, although it takes much time...The cultural sector could become more professional. But it would be best to have leadership, investors, cultural entrepreneurship, and support...I once organised a series of workshops on writing a project plan. The first two meetings were well attended, with 25 visitors, and the third meeting had much fewer visitors. As a result, opportunities were missed to professionalise and learn from each other.” – R9.

The festivals in Oldambt also help establish networks outside the Oldambt area. For example, Festival Hongerige Wolf creates social connections between local citizens and visitors from elsewhere. Next to discovering new music and art, visitors are also interested in meeting people with different backgrounds. Most visitors come from outside Oldambt, and local people who visit the festival are interested in meeting them and showing the beauty of their area (R2, R8, R10, R18, R19). The connection between local citizens, outside visitors and artists helps strengthen local citizens' networks outside their area and may also support Oldambt.

The network effects may also be reached through the improved reputation of the area because of the cultural events in Oldambt. Most respondents agree that this reputation is improving quickly and that organising such diverse, high-quality cultural events contributes to that (R3, R7, R10, R13). The festivals may make Oldambt citizens prouder and increase their willingness to be an ambassador of their area. A provincial civil servant who also has a role in organising Pura Vida has the following explanation:

“You attract a category of people who would otherwise not come here. That has an impact on local citizens. The attitude here was always: ‘it was nothing, is nothing, and will be nothing.’ We have not been proud enough of the area. But recently, this is changing. Local citizens see that more is possible. After years of negativity, there is now more positivity. People are proud of their area because they see that something is happening. More events, more tourists coming to our area, more people coming to buy a house. This makes local citizens prouder.” – R11.

Furthermore, local entrepreneurs maintain that when people in other parts of the country learn about the diverse offer of cultural festivals, they may be positively surprised and alter their view of the area (R5, R9, R17). Hence, the more active ambassadorship will be recognised by people who now know about the assets of Oldambt.

In contrast to earlier periods, being from Oldambt may open doors instead of closing them, attracting more rural newcomers, businesses and jobs. Even if the effect of these organisational and economic connections is limited, it would still be precious for an area that has encountered high unemployment rates and periods of depopulation over the past decades (R12, R14, R16). As was expected based on the literature, the cultural festivals in Oldambt thus enable more interconnectedness, both in and outside the area. This strengthens the reinvention of Oldambt.

Table 3.3 summarises the rural regeneration created through the Oldambt festivals.

TABLE 3.3 The Oldambt cultural festivals and rural regeneration. Source: Author.

Dimension	Cultural festivals in Oldambt
Local legitimacy and rootedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Respond to a local lack of cultural events</li> <li>-Community-led or with community involved</li> <li>-Rooted in forms of local capital in Oldambt. But not all forms are always used.</li> <li>-Organized in unique cultural and natural heritage, preserved through new functions</li> <li>-Create local jobs, social and cultural benefits</li> <li>-May attract new, but not young residents</li> <li>-Both community-led and private-led festivals have strong local benefits</li> </ul>
Ability to create (inter) connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Create social connections within and outside the area</li> <li>-Help create stronger Cultural platform, that creates organisational, economic, and cultural connections, but could do better.</li> <li>-Create connections between citizens, festival organizers, visitors, and artists</li> <li>-Spread knowledge on Oldambt culture and history towards urban spaces</li> </ul>

### 3.4.3 Recent developments around the festivals

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The Covid-19 pandemic, during which the research in this paper was conducted, has impacted the organisation of the festivals in Oldambt. This situation posed risks to all investigated festivals, which were cancelled at least once. While their costs continued, the festival plans were changed, disapproved, altered, and eventually withdrawn. Festival organisers feared that after years of financial worries, they could not continue if the support for cultural events and institutions diminished or another year with organisational problems struck (R2, R3, R4, R6, R7).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, three of the four investigated festivals have continued. Festival Hongerige Wolf, Grasnapolsky, and Waterbei are nowadays still organised. From 2022 onwards, Pura Vida will no longer be organised. Now that more building plots in Blauwestad are sold, the festival cannot be organised in its initial location due to a lack of space. According to one of the organisers, the festival is now the victim of its success (Grimmon, 2022). Besides that, people involved with Pura Vida already mentioned the high costs of a one-day event as a potential reason to stop organising the festival (R3, R8, R11, R13, R15). The provincial government may be less willing to invest money in promoting Blauwestad now that the project has become more successful. This also shows the risk of a top-down organised festival, which can quickly be withdrawn through a political decision.

## 3.5 Discussion and conclusion

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The results of this research show that from the perspective of the interviewed stakeholders, rural festivals in Oldambt contribute to rural regeneration in multiple ways. Despite some critiques, local citizens, who value the cultural impulse in their area, generally support the festivals. Although not all local resources are used, festivals use local political capital, and the community-led festivals of Hongerige Wolf and Waterbei also use existing economic and human capital. Meanwhile, the festivals also benefit the local area, although it is problematic to measure the economic benefits. Beyond economic benefits, the festivals enhance the cultural capital of Oldambt. They help to reinvent the area by telling its unique story to a broader audience and making local citizens more aware of Oldambt's assets. Moreover, the festivals help establish valuable network connections within and outside the area, making local citizens prouder of Oldambt and improving its image. Thus, the festivals respond to 'the need to re-make a rural area in response to decline' (Murtagh et al., 2022, p.18). The community-led festivals, as well as the private-led festival of Grasnepolsky and, to a lesser extent, government-led Pura Vida, support the reinvention of Oldambt in its post-industrial period.

The results of this paper mostly accord with existing research into the role of festivals in rural development. Like Qu and Cheer (2021) found in rural Japan, the Oldambt festivals help to reinvigorate latent cultural heritage. The increased local ambassadorship and developed skills confirm the analysis of Davies (2015). And the local benefits that the festivals create in Oldambt align with the finding of Kwiatkowski and colleagues (2020) that festivals are meaningful events that reinvent rural areas. Moreover, the role of newcomers to the area in the festival organisation confirms the analysis of Goodwinn-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones (2022) that cultural capital can be created by newcomers with a new perspective on an area.

There are also some differences with previous research results. The finding that festivals also create local benefits when not community-led differs from the analysis of Mahon and Hyyryläinen (2019) that private-led festivals have reduced local benefits and that of Duxbury and colleagues (2020) that community-led festivals better serve local interests. The respondents in this research do neither confirm the argument of Reid [28] that commercial interests constantly clash with community interests in organising festivals. However, this addition to the literature is based on the specific context of the Oldambt festivals. Grasnepolsky festival explicitly focuses on local benefits and connecting with the area. Although Grasnepolsky might be an exception, the results of this research suggest that community involvement is not always required to create local benefits and, eventually, rural regeneration.

The results of this paper also place it in the debate on exogenous and (neo-) endogenous rural development. The investigated festivals are either bottom-up organised or otherwise connected to the local area and its resources and seek to create local benefits. However, they also rely on top-down support and initiative. Multiple tiers of government have a supportive role and created a cultural infrastructure, including valuable networks, that helped festivals to thrive. Hence, the festivals' contribution to Oldambt follows a neo-endogenous understanding of rural development (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). The results suggest that the festivals and their visitors are not just 'consuming' the countryside, as Eusébio and colleagues (2017) suggested. Instead, the festivals invoke engagement between visitors and local people and help to sustain rural livelihoods while tapping into and maintaining existing local resources (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019).

There may also be some limitations to the research on which this paper is based. The results may have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the research was conducted. In this period, the prospects for the cultural sector were very uncertain (Janiszweska et al., 2021). As the festivals were cancelled, visiting and investigating them directly was impossible. Furthermore, given its qualitative nature, this research cannot make exact claims about the contributions to the area and which group profited most. There has not been a quantitative data analysis, and the research results represent the respondents' perspectives in the specific case study of the Oldambt festivals. Using the snowball method to select and interview relevant stakeholders may also have led to a biased group of respondents, which may have impacted the research results. However, this paper still gives the vital perspective of the most knowledgeable people about the festivals, which has qualitative value as such. Moreover, policy documents and other festival information have verified the respondents' perspectives to create methodological triangulation.

Future research could focus on the exact contribution of cultural festivals to rural areas, and quantitative analysis could help to reveal this. Such research could, for example, test how local citizens and visitors score on various components of the quality-of-life index before and after the festivals. This index has been used in previous research about the effects of tourism on residents (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011). The Oldambt area, which has multiple festivals with a similar local context, would be an ideal location for such research. Investigating which groups within rural areas benefit most from rural festivals would also be interesting. The inclusivity that many of these festivals aim for is vital for a successful regeneration process. Therefore, it would be helpful if researchers, policymakers, and organisers focused on how to make rural festivals beneficial for a broad public. Finally, comparing the achieved regeneration in an urban and a rural context could be interesting.

The results of this paper may also have implications for policymakers. The local political capital, in the form of support and subsidies, is a vital element in the success of the Oldambt festivals. The results of this paper show the critical role of local communities and the specific area's history. The festivals in Oldambt contribute to rural regeneration because of their bottom-up approach and top-down support; it is harder to create these effects with just top-down policies. Therefore, policymakers who want cultural festivals to regenerate their rural area depend on local initiatives, but financial and organisational support may lead to more substantial successes. The regeneration concept stresses rural areas' diversity (Murtagh et al., 2020). Other rural areas cannot precisely copy the approach in Oldambt. However, they can reinvent themselves through festivals by supporting community-led initiatives or festivals that seek to engage with local resources and create local benefits. In that regard, a more spatially just division of national funding for the cultural sector could help to regenerate rural areas further.

## Appendix

I – Respondents	
R1	Practitioner/founder Cultural event
R2	Practitioner/organiser Cultural event
R3	Civil servant Blauwestad project/Co-organizer Cultural event
R4	Practitioner/organiser Cultural event
R5	Entrepreneur/Owner location Cultural Event
R6	Practitioner/organiser Cultural event
R7	Civil servant Oldambt municipality
R8	Former Alderman Oldambt municipality
R9	Local entrepreneur cultural sector
R10	Resident location Cultural event/Former civil servant Oldambt municipality
R11	Civil servant Groningen province/Co-organizer Cultural event
R12	Provincial Executive member Groningen province
R13	Civil servant Groningen province
R14	Local entrepreneur, board member entrepreneurs' association Winschoten
R15	Civil servant Blauwestad project
R16	Journalist regional newspaper
R17	Director of local marketing organisation
R18	Student from Oldambt municipality
R19	Student from Oldambt municipality
II – Respondents' overview	
Gender	
Male	10
Female	9
Other	0
Age	
<30	2
30-65	14
>65	3
Place of living:	
Oldambt municipality	10
Groningen province	6
Elsewhere	3
Role	
Culture & media	5
Government	6
Business	3
Student	2
Retired	2

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# 4 Re-using vacant farm buildings for commercial purposes

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## Two cases from the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** Across the European Union, farm modernisation results in vacant farm buildings in agricultural areas. This is an issue at the crossroads of rural development and spatial planning. The debate often revolves around the options of either demolishing these buildings or re-using them for residential purposes. There is less emphasis, however, on re-using vacant farm buildings to create new employment opportunities in rural areas. This article analyses two cases in the Netherlands to explore the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings in relation to rural development. The analysis specifically focuses on governance issues, the contribution of different types of commercial re-use to rural communities, and how re-use helps in retaining or attracting young people. The findings suggest that commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings can attract new entrepreneurs, jobs, and liveliness to rural areas. This is likelier if local government efforts and local entrepreneurship align. The cases also show limitations of commercial re-use in relation to the potential for wider uptake and the risk of enhancing rural gentrification. This raises the question of whether the current planning systems can deal with the upcoming complex processes of rural transformation.

**KEYWORDS** Property re-use; Farm buildings; Spatial planning; Youth; Rural development; The Netherlands.

### Highlights

- Farm modernisation leads to an increase in vacant farm buildings
- Commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings contributes to rural development
- Re-use helps to attract young people to rural areas
- Successful commercial re-use requires involved local government and entrepreneurs
- Commercial re-use cannot solve the issue of vacant farm buildings, but it may help

## 4.1 Introduction

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The decline in farm numbers is transforming the economic landscape of rural Europe. Between 2005 and 2016, the European Union [EU] witnessed the cessation of over 4 million farms, constituting 28.6% of all farms. Meanwhile, the utilised agricultural area remained unchanged. Merely 6.5% of European farmers fall below the age of 35 years (Eurostat, 2021). Thus, farm enlargement goes hand in hand with decreasing opportunities for young people to work in farming. The many vacant farm buildings physically express the changing economic structure of the countryside. From a planning perspective, farm enlargement prompts consideration of viable alternatives for vacant farm buildings. From a rural development perspective, the focus is on whether new employment opportunities can be fostered in rural areas, especially for young people. This bears significance as rural areas face an ageing population, while younger people tend to move towards urban areas (Kashnitsky et al., 2021).

This article examines the situation in the Netherlands, focusing on two case studies that demonstrate the re-use of vacant farm buildings to establish new enterprises and create employment opportunities. The declining number of farms in the Netherlands aligns with the broader trend observed in the EU. In 2016, there were 32.0% fewer farms compared to 2005 (Eurostat, 2021), slightly exceeding the European average. The commercial re-use of farm buildings has been studied before (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; Fuentes et al., 2010; Verhoeve et al., 2012; Kristensen et al., 2019). This article adds to these studies and incorporates the increased redundancies of farm buildings resulting from the ongoing agricultural transformation and policy changes towards farming (Gies et al., 2016; Erisman, 2021). In the Netherlands, these policy changes are partly the result of the nitrogen crisis, in which the Dutch government has decided to diminish farming activities close to nature areas to meet European and national biodiversity targets (Van der Ploeg, 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2022).

Knowledge about the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings adds to the debate on whether the idea of a 'post-productivist economy of rural space' (as has been criticised by Marsden, 2003) can be bent towards the development of 'cooperative neo-productivism' (Burton & Wilson, 2012). This discussion fits in the long process of marginalising the once-dominant agricultural profession in rural areas. The re-use of vacant farm buildings may add to the development of rural areas as areas of consumption rather than production, or more precisely formulated, areas without jobs. The horsification of farm buildings and their re-use as residential locations are clear examples of this consumptive, gentrifying countryside (Van der Vaart, 2005; Bomans et al., 2010; Sutherland, 2021). This article also addresses the career opportunities for young people, who may be attracted to stay in or come to rural areas if they can find a job (Thissen et al., 2010; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017). It explores the re-use of vacant farm buildings as new workplaces that add new activities and jobs to rural communities, and it reviews the planning issues that go with these. After all, re-using former farm buildings may result in urban sprawl, and a lack of re-use may result in a landscape filled with ruins.

This article seeks to answer the following question: To what extent can the commercial re-use of farm buildings contribute to rural development? This is investigated by analysing two Dutch case studies of re-used farm buildings: Mouthoeve in Boekel, Noord-Brabant, and The Green East in Raalte, Overijssel. The analysis focuses on governance issues regarding re-using farms, the contribution of different types of commercial re-use to rural communities, and the extent to which the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings maintains or attracts young people to rural areas. Additionally, critical success factors will be analysed.

## 4.2 Issues of rural development and planning in re-using vacant farm buildings

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### 4.2.1 Approaches to rural development

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The role of planning in supporting rural development is broadly debated. Murdoch (2000) distinguishes between exogenous and endogenous rural development approaches. Exogeneous rural development seeks to overcome market neglect in rural areas through a vital role for large firms (Murdoch, 2000). This top-down approach requires a decisive role for the state or market agencies and comes with economies of scale. Agricultural modernisation and the large farm stables from the early decades of the Common Agricultural Policy [CAP] are examples of exogenous rural development (Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011). Alternatively, endogenous rural development seeks to promote ‘locally rooted, indigenous development capabilities.’ (Murdoch, 2000, p.407). This bottom-up approach requires a decisive role for local initiatives and enterprises, as it seeks to harness local resources (Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011).

The exogenous/endogenous development approach aims to reconcile top-down and bottom-up approaches (Murdoch, 2000). It maintains that exogenous and endogenous development processes happen simultaneously. External effects, local resources and networks of local actors all affect the success of rural development (Lowe et al., 1995, p.103). Terluin (2003) analysed the extent to which the different approaches are supported by evidence in European rural areas and found the most support for the exogenous/endogenous development approach. The study on which this article is based also assumes that the exogenous/endogenous development approach is a helpful lens to study rural development.

A parallel discussion considers the economic role of the countryside and its productivity. In the post-war period, European agriculture quickly modernised and maximised production. This approach, known as productivism, aimed to produce ample food at low prices, as the Common Agricultural Policy [CAP] emphasised. However, Marsden (1999) argues that the countryside should not be solely viewed as a site for food production but also as a space for consumption, leisure, and residence. Ilbery and Bowler (1998) propose a post-productivist countryside that involves the diversification of agricultural activities and extensification. Farmers can engage in leisure-related ventures, transforming their farms into sites for both production and consumption.

Critics, such as Wilson and Burton (2015), challenge the notion that post-productivism follows a linear progression from productivism. They argue that post-productivist and productivist practices coexist and persist in rural areas. One should thus be critical towards the use of post-productivism or the thought that the productivist era has finished. Therefore, Burton and Wilson (2012) propose using 'cooperative neo-productivism' as a lens to study rural development. Cooperative neo-productivism is "driven by an alliance of grassroots governance, corporate objectives and government facilitation" (Burton & Wilson, 2012, p.54). This means that productivist activities happen with more grassroots support and that post-productivist practices can happen simultaneously. The study on which this article is based also assumes that cooperative neo-productivism is a helpful concept for understanding rural economic production.

Concerning the economic potential of rural areas, there is also broad literature about the out-migration of rural youth and their interest in living in rural areas. Kashnitsky and colleagues (2021) show that rural areas tend to depopulate and that young, highly-educated people often leave villages and move to urban places. However, some rural communities can overcome external challenges, such as a need for more career opportunities (Li et al., 2019). Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) critique the macro-level demographic predictions on rural depopulation. Their investigation into the future dreams of the Finnish youth finds that a higher percentage of them than demographically predicted would prefer a future in rural areas. A lack of career opportunities is an essential factor in why young people leave their rural areas or are not attracted to them (Thissen et al., 2010; Makkai et al., 2017). Commercially re-used farm buildings could support rural development and incentivise young people to settle in rural areas.

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#### 4.2.2 **Alternatives for vacant farm buildings**

The re-use of vacant farm buildings, such as old stables, for new economic activities raises important planning considerations in rural areas (Klusáček et al., 2021). This article explores four alternatives to address this issue. The first alternative involves farmers re-using the buildings for other productive purposes. The second alternative is the conversion of barns and stables into housing. The third alternative, which is the focus of this article, examines the re-use of vacant farm buildings for productive functions by non-farmers. The fourth alternative is the demolition of vacant farm buildings. Each alternative presents specific planning challenges and has different implications for the local community, rural economic development, landscape preservation, and property markets. The assessment of appropriateness depends on the contextual factors surrounding the development, emphasising the need for a case-by-case evaluation.

The topics of the local community and rural economic development relate to the debate on endogenous development, as has been analysed above. Landscape development is an integrating topic of high relevance for spatial planning. Urban sprawl is one of the main issues in rural areas within commuting time of cities. As stables are scattered throughout rural areas, the re-use of stables may add to urban sprawl and harm landscape quality. In the context of the Netherlands, provinces are key actors in providing regulations that limit development outside build-up areas (Korthals Altes, 2018). Re-use may also prompt a process of rural gentrification (Sutherland, 2019). Ample re-use possibilities of farm properties may boost property prices, making farmers stop farming in these facilities, as selling the buildings for urban uses is more profitable. So, strict regulations on the re-use of farm buildings may ensure that buildings are continued to be used for farming. However, the current deterioration of farm buildings suggests the economic limits of such strict regulations. It is essential to strike a proper balance between the need for economic activities and the danger of the disposition of farm activities.

The first alternative of the re-use of farm buildings by farmers themselves fits insights raised by many scholars, including Marsden (2003) and Van der Ploeg (2018), who have indicated that there are alternative pathways to farm enlargement. One of the options is to diversify farm activities. This can be done within or outside agricultural production (Tacconi et al., 2022), such as by lengthening production lines through food processing, direct sales, or providing other services such as agritourism or childcare (Arru et al., 2021; Gramm et al., 2020). In this context, old stables, developed in one of the phases of agricultural modernisation, may still become redundant for farming purposes. However, the farmers re-use the stables for other productive purposes, adding to their income. Planning regulations play a role in defining the scope of what constitutes a farm, and the enforcement of these regulations also holds relevance. Both farm diversification and the re-use of farm buildings have developed extensively in some metropolitan areas. Kristensen and colleagues (2019) report that near Copenhagen, 60% of the farms use 'On-farm business structure diversification', including storage, offices, accommodation, and construction.

From a planning perspective, distinctions may arise between permitting auxiliary activities on a farm, such as farm shops, small camping facilities, or daycare centres, and allowing broader productive activities. Planning regulations draw a line between farms pursuing a broader agenda and companies that engage in farming as an ancillary activity. While planning measures can support local farmers in maintaining viable operations without compromising the landscape, they may not actively encourage the transformation of farms into dominant, auxiliary functions, which could disrupt the property market.

A second alternative entails the conversion of farms and barns to housing, typically in areas located within commuting distance of urban areas. This raises several concerns regarding urban sprawl and the phenomenon of 'rural gentrification' (Sutherland, 2019), whereby non-agricultural residents displace farming and other productive activities. An example of this process can be observed in Flanders (Belgium), where ample re-use of farm properties is allowed, and even more is possible as enforcement is no priority (Vlaamse Overheid, 2016). Some Flemish farmers sell their buildings to urban users and reinvest that money in green field locations in the agricultural zone. This approach is financially more attractive than reinvesting in existing farm buildings (De Waele et al., 2021). Consequently, only vacant farm buildings without commercial value remain (Verhoeve et al., 2021). In the Netherlands, the rules are much more stringent. A specific designation of a house on a farm involves that people living in a house on a former working farm must accept the environmental impacts of nearby farms (Wet Plattelandswoningen, 2012). Furthermore, provincial planning regulations, such as in Utrecht, Noord-Holland (Korthals Altes, 2018), do not allow to add of more of these dwellings to the parcel on which farm buildings are located without provincial consent on the change of planning provisions.

The third alternative involves re-using farm buildings for alternative productive activities, which can have positive implications for rural employment and the vitality of local communities. From a planning perspective, ample re-use of scattered farm buildings may provoke sprawl of economic sites and infrastructures. A building contractor, a transport company or a garden centre located at an old farm may contribute to a generation of excessive traffic relating to the road capacity (Jaarsma & De Vries, 2013). Therefore, re-use may affect the spatial development and landscape negatively. This may even result in 'virtual farmland', i.e., 'land within zones allocated for agriculture that is used for non-agricultural land uses' (Verhoeve et al., 2015). Therefore, similar to housing, the re-use of farm buildings for work-related activities can contribute to rural gentrification.

A final alternative is the demolition of vacant farm buildings. This alternative often lacks an economic rationale. Who is going to pay for the demolition? Here, planning authorities have found potential in using a 'cross-subsidy approach' (Van Rij, 2008, p. 80) in which new urban ('red') developments pay for improving the qualities of green areas. There are various examples of such a 'red for green approach' (Van Rij, 2008, p. 80; De Wolff & Spaans, 2010; Simeonova et al., 2019). A well-known and still running (Orobio de Castro, 2023) example is the 'space-for-space programme' (De Jong & Spaans, 2009; Van der Veen et al., 2010) in the Netherlands in which development rights for new housing are provided under the condition that former pig stables are demolished. However, this solution tends to be costly and

only feasible in areas with sufficient market potential and a regulatory planning framework that allows linking new development to demolishing existing stables. It primarily focuses on housing development and does not necessarily contribute to rural job creation, aligning with the shift towards post-productivist rural areas.

This points to another issue of relevance for choosing these alternatives, the potential for the re-use of farm buildings. Next to many old farm buildings for which alternatives can be developed based on their heritage values (Fuentes, 2010), also different farm buildings have been developed as part of modernisation. These buildings are tailor-made to a specific use and time-bound to a specific stage in modernisation. Many of these, like former pig stables, do not fit current standards and lack re-use potential (Gies et al., 2016). Removing these structures, including underground manure facilities, is expensive. Financial barriers may result in the abandonment of buildings (Joye et al., 2018). This issue of outdated once-modern farm buildings is very explicitly the case with former collectivist farms in Central and Eastern Europe (Navrátil et al., 2020), which serve as 'agricultural brownfields' (Skála et al., 2013; Navrátil et al., 2021). In the Netherlands, it is estimated that by 2030, the number of vacant farm buildings will starkly increase. Most appear unsuitable for re-use outside the agricultural sector (Gies et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it is also noted by Navrátil and colleagues (2020) that there is a lack of literature on the re-use process.

However, from a rural development perspective, re-using farm buildings could help strengthen rural areas. Daalhuizen and colleagues (2003) already pointed out the potential for rural municipalities to profit from rural economic dynamics by allowing re-use for commercial purposes. Cano and colleagues (2013) argue that re-using farm buildings results in new economic activities, including cultural tourism, benefiting the local community.

Kristensen and colleagues (2019) raise this tension between the planning and rural development perspectives:

“From a physical planning perspective, a location in an industrial zone would comply with current planning intentions and designs. Hence, from a public economic perspective this would be a wiser use of public investment in infrastructure, utilities, etc. However, from a rural development perspective, the use of left-over buildings and the creation of economic activity in rural areas can be a vital economic driver [...]” (Kristensen et al., 2019, p. 10)

Furthermore, considering planning aspects, the significant decline in farms and the rise of non-farm rural properties have led planning authorities to adopt less stringent policies. There was initial hesitation in the Netherlands to permit the commercial re-use of farm buildings, but this has become more flexible (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; Van der Vaart, 2005; Gies et al., 2016). All four alternatives, including the commercial re-use of stables, can now be found. In Czechia, the potential for new industrial employment in abandoned farm properties is seen as positive (Klusáček et al., 2021). The re-use potential varies depending on the local context, specific farm locations, and setups, making case studies valuable for more specific insights. Ultimately, determining the most suitable alternatives from a rural development perspective relies on the unique context of each situation.

## 4.3 Methodology

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This article is based on an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project in which different promising rural development practices have been studied. For the case study selection, an analytical framework has been used in which potential cases have been tested for the following dimensions: (1) efficiency, (2) legitimacy, (3) local rootedness, (4) ability to create (inter)connections, (5) innovativeness and (6) adaptability of the practice (Murtagh et al., 2021). These dimensions have been selected to grasp these cases' potential for rural development, and the outcomes connect practices to their context. A particular emphasis was placed on whether these initiatives could attract young people to rural areas. The selection process aimed to identify two promising cases rather than representative ones, resulting in a critical case study approach. If the commercial re-use is not successful in these cases, it is unlikely to be successful in any case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The information about the cases was obtained by checking the websites of the case study projects and two telephone calls with relevant stakeholders in which more information was provided (Mouthoeve, 2023; The Green East, 2023; R1, R3, R14, R15). Eventually, two farm conversions in the Netherlands were selected: Mouthoeve in Boekel, province Noord-Brabant, and The Green East in Raalte, province Overijssel. Table 4.1 shows how both selected cases fit the selection dimensions.

TABLE 4.1 Case study selection. Source: This research, based on Murtagh et al. (2021).nHere

Dimension	Mouthoeve, Boekel	The Green East, Raalte
Efficiency	Achieves the intended aims and connects with a broader development framework—minor effect on sustainability.	Achieves the intended aims and has an expected spin-off effect—minor effect on sustainability.
Legitimacy	Based on local informal knowledge and aligning with local policies.	Addresses the need for local jobs and diversification of the rural economy.
Local Rootedness	Uses local financial capital and existing built capital that is local heritage for re-use.	Uses local financial capital and existing built capital for re-use and focuses on attracting young people who are new to the area.
Ability to create (inter) connections	Helps to connect Boekel and its businesses with the broader area by attracting visitors, shop owners and employees.	Helps to connect agro-food businesses in the area and interested students from the broader region.
Innovativeness	The practice of creating businesses in vacant farm buildings close to the town can be transferred to other places.	The clustering of businesses suggests organisational innovation and represents a new solution for the vacant farm buildings problem.
Adaptability of the practice	Strengthens local social, human, and built capital while increasing economic diversity.	Strengthens local human and built capital while increasing economic diversity.

Numerous vacant farm buildings exist in the provinces of Noord-Brabant and Overijssel (see Table 4.2), and further redundancies are expected (Gies & Naeff, 2019; Gies & Smidt, 2020). Policies to meet nitrogen targets (Erisman, 2021; Rijksoverheid, 2022) will add to this. The potential for the re-use of vacant farm buildings will partly go to agrarian re-use and other commercial re-uses, concentrating on vacant farm buildings closely located to settlements (Gies & Smidt, 2020).

TABLE 4.2 Overview of vacant farm buildings in Noord-Brabant and Overijssel. Source: Gies & Naeff (2019); Gies & Smidt (2020).

	Noord-Brabant 2017	Noord-Brabant 2030 (estimate)	Overijssel 2018	Overijssel 2030 (estimate)
No. of farms	9,400	6,800	6,200	4,850
Surface farm buildings	26,6 million m <sup>2</sup>	Not available	14,23 million m <sup>2</sup>	Not available
Surface vacant farm buildings	2,0 million m <sup>2</sup>	5,26 million m <sup>2</sup>	1,56 million m <sup>2</sup>	2,49 million m <sup>2</sup>
Surface re-used vacant farm buildings	0,6 million m <sup>2</sup>	2,76 million m <sup>2</sup>	0,49 million m <sup>2</sup>	0,83 million m <sup>2</sup>

In the Netherlands, it is difficult to deal with vacant farm buildings (Gies et al., 2016). They are not always used, and, in some cases, vacant farm buildings are used for illegal activities, such as synthetic-drugs laboratories (Claessens et al., 2019). Existing farm buildings from before 1965 are generally made of more sustainable materials and may add to landscape amenities and have more multi-use potential than farm buildings built later. These buildings are, however, scarce in Noord-Brabant (14.6% of the surface) and Overijssel (22.6%). The farm buildings built between 1965 and 1993 are the most problematic. During this period, asbestos was common in farm building construction (Gies et al., 2016). Moreover, the buildings were tailor-made for a single type of agricultural activity. In both Noord-Brabant (43.6% of the surface) and Overijssel (42.7%), a large part of the surface of farm buildings is from this period. Farm buildings built after 1993 can often be modified to meet current functional, material, and animal welfare requirements (Gies et al., 2016). Such buildings are also found in Noord-Brabant (41.7% of the surface) and Overijssel (34.7%) (Gies & Naeff, 2019; Gies & Smidt, 2020).

**TABLE 4.3** Information about selected cases. Source: Gemeente Boekel (2016); Kadaster (2023); Mouthoeve (2023); The Green East (2023).

	Mouthoeve, Boekel	The Green East, Raalte
Permit granted	2015	Not applicable
Opened	2017	2018
Gross floor area	1650m <sup>2</sup>	1500m <sup>2</sup>
No. of companies	20	6

The case studies (see Table 4.3; See Figure 4.1) are based on analysing policy documents, interviews with relevant stakeholders and site visits. Respondents comprised owners of the re-used buildings, entrepreneurs and employees, local entrepreneurs, local politicians, representatives from village councils, and civil servants on the local and provincial levels. To pay attention to the impact on young people, they have explicitly been approached for interviewing. Although the study occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, many interviewees preferred on-site interviews. In total, 23 interviews have been held, of which 13 (R1-R13) at Mouthoeve and 10 (R14-R23) at The Green East (see List of respondents).



FIG. 4.1 Case study locations. Source: Authors, based on PDOK (2022).

## 4.4 Case study Mouthoeve

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Mouthoeve in Boekel is a former dairy farm redeveloped into a commercial shopping centre, and it is located about 400 meters from the shops in the town centre (see Figure 4.2). Boekel had 10,785 inhabitants in 2020 (CBS, 2020) and is a town and municipality in the East of Noord-Brabant, an area with many landless pig farms. Over the last decades, numerous policy initiatives have been employed to reduce the concentration of pig farms because of their effect on the environment (van den Brink & Heinen, 2002; Janssen-Jansen, 2008). Additionally, the national government has established ambitious targets for nitrogen reduction in the area, which results in more vacant farm buildings (Rijksoverheid, 2022).

Mouthoeve is located adjacent to the residential area of Boekel (see Figure 4.2). The municipality bought the farm in 2007, and this is an uncommon policy action for municipalities in the Netherlands (Gies et al., 2016). The motive behind this acquisition was the municipality's concern about potential conflicts between residents and the farmer, prompting them to take ownership of the farm (R2). In 2015, a local entrepreneur bought the farm from the municipality and developed a plan to re-use it for catering services and a mall with craft shops (see Figure 4.3). Parking places were also created on the compound. It opened in early 2017. The entrepreneur was motivated to contribute to the local community (R1). Currently, it hosts 20 companies, including a craft nut shop, a flower shop, a hairdresser, a yoga studio, and a home furnisher (see Figure 4.4). Mouthoeve attracts entrepreneurs with small shops, low rents, an original business location, and flexible rent contracts (R1, R8, R10).

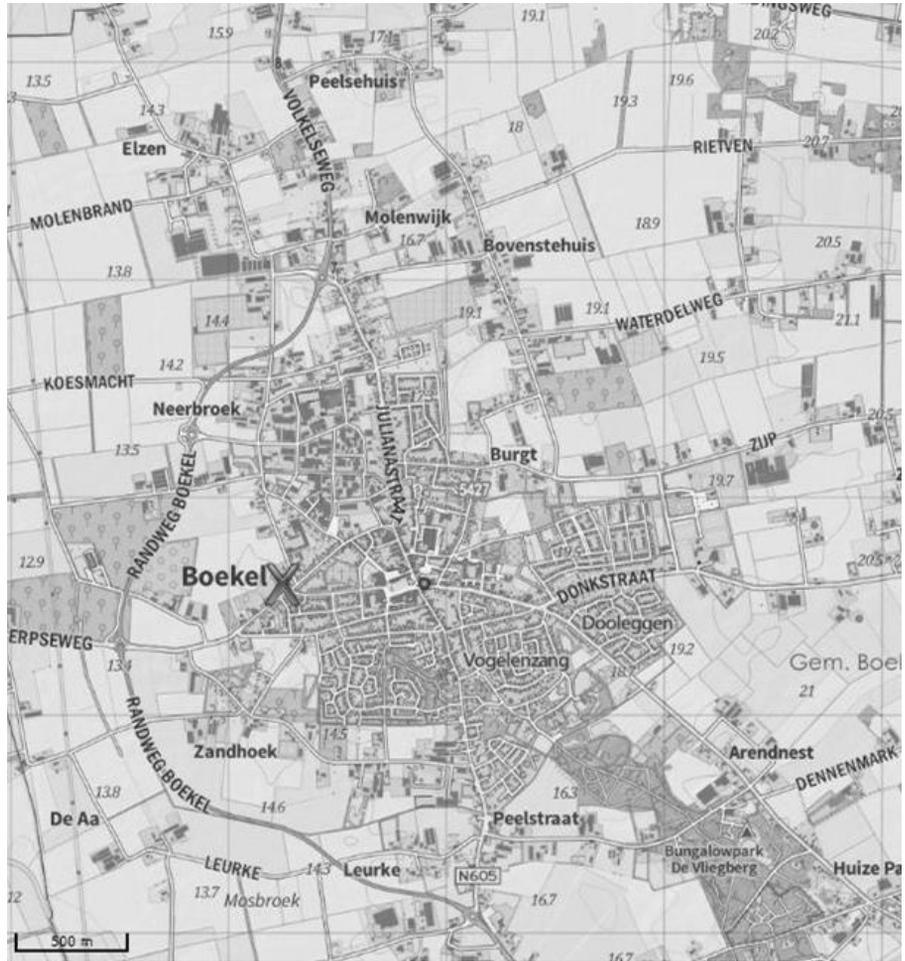


FIG. 4.2 Mouthoeve in Boekel. Source: Authors, based on PDOK (2022).



FIG. 4.3 The re-used farm building of Mouthoeve . Source: First author (2020).



FIG. 4.4 Shops inside Mouthoeve. Source: First author (2020).

The developments taking place at Mouthoeve serve as a prime example of Boekel's governance approach. This municipality has gained regional recognition for its accommodating stance and flexible approach towards planning regulations (R1, R2, R5, R8, R9, R13). In its 2011 structural vision, the Boekel municipality suggests that the reduction in agricultural employment should be offset by employment opportunities in other sectors, acknowledging the presence of numerous local businesses within and outside the town (Gemeente Boekel, 2011, p.39). This indicates that the municipality supports initiatives like Mouthoeve and does not necessarily require such developments to be situated in the town centre.

The municipality had bought the dairy farm close to the settlement. In 2007, it listed the main farmhouse, without the stable, as a municipal heritage, a category of monuments that municipalities can decide about to protect its cultural-historical and design characteristics (Gemeente Boekel, 2016, R2). As a seller of the farm, the municipality was immediately optimistic about the plan and was quite helpful in granting permits for the type of shops (R1). It issued a local land use plan for the site location to allow the redevelopment. The idea was that the new functions would provide a financial basis for the reconstruction and maintenance of the heritage and architectural values of the farm without costs to the municipality. The land use designations were the following: social services; services; supportive catering (less than 20% of the area); crafts (based on a list); supportive shops with agricultural regional products and products derived from functions mentioned above; one dwelling on a specific location; heritage values and parking (Gemeente Boekel, 2016).

Initially, there were strict regulations concerning the number of retail and craft shops permitted. For instance, shop owners had to regularly organise workshops to qualify as "craft shops" and adhere to the permit conditions. However, these rules later became more lenient, and holding workshops is no longer obligatory. The entrepreneurs at Mouthoeve express their satisfaction with this flexible approach, which contributes to making Boekel an appealing municipality for starting a business (R1, R8, R9, R10). The municipality's adaptability appears to support the success of Mouthoeve.

Among the other shop owners in Boekel, there are some complaints about how the municipality dealt with Mouthoeve. Some think the flexibility was also necessary since the municipality had to sell an outdated dairy farm on the edge of a town (R12). The fact that new shops were allowed conflicts with the stricter local planning rules on where shops are usually allowed. The municipality wants other shops to stay in or relocate to the town centre, where redevelopment is about to occur (R2, R3, R4, R5). For some local entrepreneurs, the contrasts between this policy and the generous permits at Mouthoeve show that the municipality is fickle. Furthermore, they fear that if the expensive town centre redevelopment leads to higher rents, the rent gap with Mouthoeve becomes

too large, resulting in unfair advantages for shop owners at Mouthoeve and more vacant shops in the town centre (R11, R12). The municipality and the entrepreneurs at Mouthoeve are much less concerned about this (R1, R2, R4, R5, R10).

These differing perspectives also highlight a significant risk associated with planning flexibility. When entrepreneurs perceive that their competitors can benefit from this flexibility while they cannot, it can undermine trust in local government. To mitigate this, transparency is crucial in decision-making, demonstrating that equal decisions are made in similar situations to prevent any perception of unfair advantages given to specific entrepreneurs.

Mouthoeve also appears to contribute positively to the local community. Despite initial doubts expressed by some residents and local retailers, the entrepreneurs at Mouthoeve now report having a good relationship with these groups. Concerns among residents regarding the viability of the shops and fears of future vacancies (R1, R8, R9, R10, R11) have diminished since the opening. Local citizens appreciate the added value, which has also strongly increased their opportunities to buy locally (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5). Most entrepreneurs experience little competition from the (craft) shops at Mouthoeve, as they are focusing on different target groups (R3, R11, R12). An exception may be the flower shop (R8). Despite initial doubts, Mouthoeve seems to be supported by the local community of Boekel.

Moreover, Mouthoeve attracts young and female entrepreneurs who would otherwise have been located elsewhere or would not have started a business. The small shops, low rents, and flexible lease contracts severely lowered the barriers to entry for these entrepreneurs, and it helped to cover the costs of starting up a business. Mouthoeve was a perfect location for these entrepreneurs to begin their shop (R1, R8, R9, R10). Some shop owners had searched across the wider region for business opportunities and ultimately opted for Mouthoeve. They cite the unique atmosphere, setting Mouthoeve apart from conventional shopping malls or high streets, as a key motivating factor for choosing this location. Without this distinctive setting, they would not have chosen Boekel as their business location (R8, R9). The specificity of a re-used farm building thus makes it more attractive for young entrepreneurs. The businesses offer jobs to employees from the town and the broader region (R1, R8, R9, R10). Therefore, the practice directly contributes to regeneration in Boekel.

Mouthoeve exemplifies how a former farm building can be a suitable venue for (craft) shops, particularly when situated near a town. The presence of a determined local entrepreneur and a flexible governance approach are additional crucial factors. However, this flexibility carries the risk of potential disparities in treatment compared to other entrepreneurs.

## 4.5 Case study The Green East

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The Green East in Raalte is a former experimental pig farm of Wageningen University & Research [WUR], which has been redeveloped into a Business and Research centre for innovative start-ups in the circular economy. It is located outside the town settlement but only 500 meters from the N348 main road (see Figure 4.5). Raalte (19,880 inhabitants) is the main town of the eponymous municipality of 37,712 inhabitants (CBS, 2020) and is located in Salland, Overijssel, an area with traditionally more dairy than pig farmers.

After WUR ended the activities and decided to sell the farm, a local company bought it in 2017 (R14, R15, R16, R22). Two stables were still leased to a local pig farmer. However, the local company, active in the glue industry, aimed to start innovations, including using glue in agricultural production. It considered the vacant farm stable of WUR, which had been used to research before, a suitable location (R14, R22). The location was too large, so the company initially planned to attract other innovative businesses or start-ups by letting offices and laboratory spaces (R15, R16, R18, R21, R22). The site could also serve as an educational hub for students from applied universities and vocational schools. In August 2018, the project, known as 'The Green East,' opened its doors (R14, R15, R16, R22). It currently houses four companies in the agri-food industry, a medical biotech company, and a landscape consultancy firm (see Figures 4.6 and 4.7). Aside from the redevelopment and the establishment of lab facilities, no new utilities were added. The main objective was to create an inspiring location for their own business and other innovative ventures, with the added benefit of attracting young people to the area through education and employment opportunities (R22).



FIG. 4.5 The Green East in Raalte. Source: Authors, based on PDOK (2022).



FIG. 4.6 The re-used farm building of The Green East . Source: First author (2021).



FIG. 4.7 Pink-lighted research and production facilities inside The Green East. Source: First author (2021).

Concerning governance issues, the Raalte municipality, the province of Overijssel and the regional development agency OostNL were involved and supportive from the beginning (R14, R15, R16, R22). The local land use plan has a specific designation of 'test farm' (*proefboerderij*) based on the previous land use by WUR, which was defined as '...a company focusing on knowledge, education and innovation that conducts research into innovations in the agricultural sector; this includes innovation in the field of new varieties of arable and open field crops, milk production, nutrition, housing and automation' (Gemeente Raalte, 2012; 2021; (translation by authors)). This designation was not changed to accommodate the companies at The Green East and was considered wide enough to fit the new activities. The Raalte municipality also developed its new planning vision during the period in which The Green East was developed. This vision includes the opportunity to develop small businesses in the areas outside settlements (Gemeente Raalte, 2020). As The Green East fits this vision, it is understandable that the municipality did not require it to be developed at another location in Raalte.

Environmental issues also played a role. When the local company bought the experimental pig farm, two old and environmentally unfriendly stables were left (R14, R15, R16, R20, R22). Although a local pig farmer used to lease these buildings, the new owners feared that they would make it harder to create a better atmosphere for their innovative business environment, making it more challenging to expand the office spaces in the future. Consequently, the lease contract was not renewed, and the owner of The Green East unilaterally decided to demolish the outdated farm stables, which had much asbestos in the construction (R14, R22). Usually, this would be costly for a farmer and only happen if subsidised. In this case, the new owners paid to demolish the buildings and later received a permit to connect two office spaces, between which the former stables were located, instead (R14, R22).

However, the initial plan to collaborate with educational institutions did not materialise as intended. The idea of regular student visits for practical lessons on agrotechnological innovations faced practical challenges. It was determined that such visits would disrupt business operations and prove unprofitable for the organising entrepreneurs (R14, R18, R19, R21, R22). Consequently, the scope of collaboration with educational institutions was limited to providing student internships (R22).

The Green East seems to contribute to the local community. A successful family business from Raalte, which already had strong contacts with the local population, entrepreneurs, and politicians, has created it. The newly attracted businesses, who are the rural newcomers, feel welcome and supported (R18, R19, R21, R23). The supportive approach can also be related to the net contribution of The Green East to

the area. A pig farm with quite some pollution has been replaced by a multi-company building in which innovative businesses seek to create jobs for highly educated employees (R16, R20, R21, R22). Local citizens are happy because they now have less nuisance (such as smell) from the pig farm (R15, R16, R20).

One significant benefit of The Green East is its ability to attract young and highly educated individuals to Raalte and the province of Overijssel, who may not have otherwise considered relocating to the area (R14, R18, R19, R20, R21, R22, R23). If the businesses at The Green East experience substantial growth and transition beyond the start-up phase, they will be invited to continue their operations at a regular business park within the municipality. This planned progression would enable them to scale up their production volumes. Simultaneously, the vacant space at The Green East would become available for new start-ups (R15, R16, R18, R19, R20). So, The Green East may provide Raalte with a continuous stream of young and talented people, which will help regenerate the area, which fits local policy ambitions (R15, R16, R20). Although this future ambition sounds promising, it is still being determined whether it will materialise. After all, the specific situation of The Green East was attractive for settling entrepreneurs, who sometimes came from other provinces (R14, R18, R19). If a future scale-up cannot be continued at the premises, it might move away from Raalte altogether.

In this case, the ability of a local family firm to develop this plan is the first critical factor. In addition, the role of the municipality, the province, and the development agency OostNL in supporting The Green East and helping to find suitable entrepreneurs is also essential (R15, R16, R17, R22). On the other hand, the plan to attract students did not materialise.

## 4.6 Critical factors in both cases

Both examples demonstrate the positive impact of re-using former farm buildings for commercial activities, making the areas more appealing to young people and supporting rural regeneration. Entrepreneurs involved in these cases emphasise that they would not have chosen a conventional business location within these municipalities (R8, R9, R10, R18, R21). This underscores the significance of this practice in rural development (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; Kristensen et al., 2019).

Some critical factors may support the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings (see Table 4.4). In both cases, a local entrepreneur with a good network among the local community and institutions played an important role. The cases also showed that specific circumstances, such as the special status of the farm stable, help to make governmental institutions supportive of commercial re-use. This might also apply in other contexts. At The Green East, for example, it was helpful that their premise had already been used as a test farm and had a research function, which meant that this did not need to be added to the permit. While not a decisive factor, this aspect helped to facilitate the re-use of vacant farm buildings.

TABLE 4.4 Case study results. Source: This research.

	Mouthoeve, Boekel	The Green East, Raalte
Planning principle	New local land use plan	Continuation within existing land use plan as 'test farm'
Key actor	Local entrepreneur	Local entrepreneur
No. of jobs created at firms in a location	25-35	25
Contribution to local community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– More shop diversity</li> <li>– Increased job availability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Less disturbance from farm</li> <li>– Increased job availability</li> </ul>
Economic sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– So far, an economic success</li> <li>– Risk for future shop vacancies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– So far, an economic success</li> <li>– Risk that firms may leave during scale-up process</li> </ul>
Critical factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Local entrepreneur</li> <li>– Flexible governance approach</li> <li>– In line with local policies</li> <li>– Focus on heritage value &amp; authenticity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Local entrepreneur</li> <li>– Governmental support</li> <li>– In line with local policies</li> <li>– Focus on authenticity</li> </ul>
Disadvantages and potential problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Flexible governance approach</li> <li>– Future economic success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Failed to attract students</li> <li>– Ability to maintain highly-qualified young people</li> </ul>

Furthermore, it helps if a plan for commercial re-use goes hand in hand with local ambitions. Suppose a municipality or local businesses consider concentrating certain types of businesses in an original location. In that case, this could be an argument to re-use a vacant farm stable commercially. For example, The Green East coincided with a local ambition to attract start-ups in the agri-food industry (Gemeente Raalte, 2020). As suggested by Daalhuizen and colleagues (2003), municipal support is crucial for the success of commercial re-use projects involving former farm buildings.

Attention to architecture, heritage and authenticity is also critical in re-using former farm buildings for commercial purposes. If the re-used farm stable aims to attract multiple businesses and contribute to regeneration, it seems vital that people are proud to work in this location. Constructing a narrative around the commercial re-use of a vacant farm stable can immediately enhance its appeal to potential newcomers in rural areas. Both The Green East and Mouthoeve are considered attractive, in part, because they focused on preserving the authentic character of the farm buildings (R14, R21, R23). Shop owners at Mouthoeve argue that its authenticity attracts potential new shop owners and clients (R9, R10).

This fits the design background in planning practice. Many planning professionals are trained to consider design quality and heritage values in planning decisions, and many planning frameworks are open to this line of thinking. The listing as a municipal heritage of Mouthoeve in Boekel shows that policies aiming to protect the heritage by developing a viable function for the farm can be successful.

## 4.7 Discussion

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Re-using vacant farm buildings for commercial use has both positive and negative environmental implications. On the positive side, it prolongs the lifespan of existing structures and reduces the need for new construction (R13). Additionally, it prevents the gradual deterioration of outdated farm buildings and facilitates the removal of environmentally harmful materials like asbestos. However, there are also adverse environmental effects associated with this practice. It can conflict with anti-sprawl policies as farm buildings are scattered throughout rural areas. The commercial re-use of these buildings may result in the spread of functions outside villages and towns, leading to increased traffic in these areas. Research by Jaarsma and De Vries (2013) in the Netherlands and Belgium highlighted the traffic generation impact of farm-building conversions in areas outside settlements.

However, the proximity of Mouthoeve to town centre shops allows visitors to combine visits without needing a car in between (see Figure 4.2). The strategic location of The Green East near the N348 main road facilitates convenient handling of additional traffic (see Figure 4.5). These location-specific details significantly influence the planning impact and the potential for farm-building re-use. The farther away from settlements, the more likely that the negative environmental effects outweigh the positive ones, as observed in the Dutch (Daalhuizen et al., 2003) and Danish (Kristensen et al., 2019) contexts. Planning systems can be adapted to address these differences. For instance, zoning plans could consider the potential positive and negative impacts of commercial re-use of farm buildings, with closer proximity to towns and villages being seen as an opportunity to enhance rural development.

The issue of careful use of land also has broader implications. Vandermeer and Halleux (2017) evaluated industrial land policies' spatial and economic effectiveness in Northwest Europe. They found that in 'predominantly rural regions, close to a city, an increase in land consumption for economic activities is accompanied by a decrease in the production of wealth and employment numbers' (Vandermeer & Halleux, 2017, p.1468). They argue that in areas with low GDP and jobs, offering more land for economic activities is an ineffective strategy (Vandermeer & Halleux, 2017). For the re-use of farms for commercial purposes, this suggests that careful consideration of new functions matters. Providing extra properties for commercial purposes will not automatically create jobs or economic development.

Nevertheless, the active businesses at The Green East are a straightforward addition to the local business landscape (R15, R16, R20). This has attracted potentially interesting enterprises that have the potential to create numerous highly skilled jobs. As a result, it opens up opportunities for educated young individuals to either remain in or migrate to the Raalte area (R14, R18, R19, R21, R22, R23), thereby partially revitalising the countryside in the municipality of Raalte. Similarly, Mouthoeve has enhanced the appeal of Boekel as a settlement location for young entrepreneurs (R8, R9). Compared with The Green East, the entrepreneurs at Mouthoeve will generate fewer jobs in the long term due to the limited growth potential of shops. Thissen and colleagues (2010) emphasised the significance of career prospects in attracting young people to rural areas in the Netherlands, and this research supports their findings. Although the employment impact is relatively modest, it holds importance for local entrepreneurs, residents, and municipalities.

The contribution of The Green East and Mouthoeve to rural economic development confirms earlier findings by Daalhuizen and colleagues (2003) about the positive effects of the re-use of farm buildings in the Netherlands. It also suggests the value of the exogenous/endogenous development approach proposed by Terluin (2003). The exogenous process of the increasing number of vacant farm buildings happens simultaneously with initiatives by local entrepreneurs to re-use them commercially. The top-down flexibility and support of local or regional governmental institutions also strengthen the bottom-up initiative of commercial re-use. The Green East and Mouthoeve can also be seen as examples of a cooperative neo-productivist approach to rural development, as explained by Burton and Wilson (2012). The commercial re-use of farm buildings that used to be close to settlements and the jobs created align with community embeddedness and local political interests. Meanwhile, the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings also supports the commercial and productive interests of the involved entrepreneurs. As shown in Table 4.4, the current balance between local embeddedness, and governmental and commercial interests could be disturbed when shop vacancies increase or firms leave during scale-up processes.

While the approach of The Green East and Mouthoeve can be generalised to some extent, there are limitations to the widespread applicability of commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. Many countries already face an oversupply of retail and office spaces, and the demand for such spaces has recently decreased (Remøy & Street, 2018; Buitelaar et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this trend (Sheth, 2020). Therefore, it is unlikely that there will be significant demand for extensive commercial re-use of the extensive inventory of vacant farm buildings in the Netherlands. This is already shown in the province of Noord-Brabant, where the provincial government tested the demand for commercial

re-use and found that this demand was limited (R7, R13). If the demand does increase, this may lead to shop and office vacancies in other locations, partially shifting the vacancy problem from vacant farm buildings to rural retail and office spaces. This would limit the positive effect on rural development. However, the attractive landscape that comes with certain locations with vacant farm buildings may allow for forms of development that would not happen in the current rural retail and office spaces. Entrepreneurs contend that they mostly settled in Boekel or Raalte because of the uniqueness of Mouthoeve (R9, R10) and The Green East (R14, R21).

Planning issues are also involved in permitting commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. Many governmental institutions, even the relatively flexible municipalities of Boekel and Raalte, work from the established tradition of separating functions rather than from a logic of mixed-use (Groulx et al., 2022). They prefer to concentrate shops in town or village centres, businesses in business parks, residents within settlements, and to locate farming in the areas outside settlements. They fear that a mixture of these activities would create multiple problems and may reduce the planning advantages of combining similar activities in specific places. If farmers, residents, and business owners have their activities very close to each other, this may incite conflicts between them, while the countryside clutters. For these reasons, governments are likely hesitant to permit increased commercial activities in vacant farm buildings and only allow this when it fits the local context. Rural gentrification is a specific planning issue; that is, non-farming values exceed farm values in such a way that it impedes access to land for new farmers. Access to land is a significant issue in rural regeneration (Korthals Altes, 2022). However, in cases where vacant farm buildings are left empty, and there is limited potential for agricultural re-use, commercial re-use can be a helpful option in maintaining landscape qualities and in supporting rural development.

In an international context, the findings of this study suggest that the commercial re-use of farm buildings can offer opportunities for rural development in specific circumstances. These circumstances may vary in different countries. Studies conducted in Belgium by Verhoeve and colleagues (2012) and in Denmark by Kristensen and colleagues (2019) have revealed that farm diversification is often unplanned and not systematically monitored by governments. In contrast, in the cases examined in this research, the government played a supportive role. It would benefit governments across the European Union to have a clearer understanding of the extent of farm conversions and their potential for commercial re-use.

## 4.8 Conclusion

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This article studied the contribution of commercial re-use of farm buildings to rural development by analysing cases in Boekel and Raalte, The Netherlands. Re-using vacant farm buildings for commercial purposes helps to support rural development, albeit to a limited extent. From a planning perspective, it presents promising opportunities to deal with the surplus of unused agricultural structures in rural areas. Commercial re-use could be one of these solutions, depending on local circumstances. The involvement of a local entrepreneur, the alignment with local policy ambitions, and a focus on authenticity help to enthuse the local community. Moreover, the cooperative neo-productivist commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings helps to attract and to retain young people in rural communities. However, the positive impacts found in these cases do not suggest that a sole focus on commercial re-use would solve the problem of vacant farm buildings, as the demand for commercial re-use remains relatively small. In general, careful land use is recommended. Furthermore, in less ideal cases than those studied in this article, the adverse effects of commercial re-use are likelier to outweigh the positive effects. The planning strategies of local governments may counter plans to allow mixed-use of space. This would reduce the opportunities to make commercial re-use successful since local governmental support was a critical success factor for both The Green East and Mouthoeve. Further away from settlements, environmental effects such as increased traffic may appear.

In future research, four topics deserve further investigation. First, it would be interesting to evaluate the success of these cases in the long run. Will the promising results so far endure in the upcoming decade? Second, the success of commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings in other countries. Are there similar planning issues? How significant is the demand for this solution in dealing with the problem of vacant farm buildings? Third, the problem of vacant farm buildings in the Netherlands requires further analysis. This research suggests that re-use for commercial purposes is one of the solutions, albeit only in particular contexts. Fourth, the issue of how this can be translated into planning strategies, visions and policies warrants further research. On the one hand, policymakers do not want to give way to massive urban sprawl, but on the other hand, they promote commercial development on sites that are fit for this purpose. This relates to the well-known topic of discretion in planning.

Compared to a potential state of decay, with all the problems that come with such a state, both Mouthoeve and The Green East have a profoundly better impact on their respective areas. They help to attract new entrepreneurs, to create jobs and to improve the countryside's livability.

## Appendix

List of respondents	
R1	Owner Mouthoeve
R2	Civil servant Spatial Planning Boekel Municipality
R3	Young Civil servant Boekel Municipality
R4	Young Civil servant Permits Boekel Municipality
R5	Alderman Boekel Municipality
R6	Civil servant Spatial Planning North Brabant Province
R7	Young Civil servant North Brabant Province
R8	Young Shop owner Mouthoeve
R9	Young Shop owner Mouthoeve
R10	Shop owner Mouthoeve
R11	Local entrepreneur, board member entrepreneurs' association Boekel
R12	Local entrepreneur, board member entrepreneurs' association Boekel
R13	Programme leader, vacant farm buildings, North Brabant Province
R14	Young Employee of Main practitioner The Green East
R15	Young Civil servant Spatial Planning Raalte Municipality
R16	Alderman Raalte Municipality
R17	Civil servant Spatial Planning Overijssel Province
R18	Entrepreneur The Green East
R19	Entrepreneur The Green East
R20	Local entrepreneur, board member entrepreneurs' association Raalte
R21	Entrepreneur The Green East
R22	Young Main Entrepreneur/Owner The Green East
R23	Young Employee of an entrepreneur at The Green East

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# 5 Urban political overrepresentation and access to public funding for municipalities in the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** Advantageous positions for politically overrepresented groups and rural political discontent are widely debated in academia. However, the role urban political overrepresentation may have in benefiting urban citizens and as an explanation for rural political discontent has hitherto received little attention. This paper addresses urban overrepresentation within national politics and suggests how this, in turn, engenders favorable policies for extremely urbanized municipalities. The paper refers to the Dutch context to illustrate how urban political overrepresentation operates, the access that municipalities with different degrees of urbanization have to public funding, and how they profit from the region deals between 2017 and 2020. The most urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands are found to be politically overrepresented at the national level and have relatively good access to public funding. This is likely to produce benefits for these municipalities and their inhabitants. This paper discusses how these benefits may be an explanation for political discontent in other municipalities.

**KEYWORDS** Urban political overrepresentation; Local public finance; Distributive politics; Rural resentment; Region deals; The Netherlands

### Highlights

- The most urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands are overrepresented at the national political level
- The most urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands have better access to public funding than other municipalities
- Urban political overrepresentation may create benefits for urban municipalities and citizens
- Urban political overrepresentation may explain rural political discontent

## 5.1 Introduction

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In March 2023, the Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB) won the provincial elections in the Netherlands. This party, founded in 2019 to represent the countryside, was successful throughout the country and received its highest vote share in ‘not urbanized’ municipalities. The BBB victory was explained as an expression of rural discontent with environmental policies and with the decline of public services (Bounds, 2023). Interestingly, between 2017 and 2021, the Dutch government acknowledged a long-term need for more attention to regions outside the main cities, and it developed a policy program to support such regions (known as the ‘region deals’) (Tweede Kamer, 2020). The BBB victory showed that these efforts were insufficient to prevent rural electorates from abandoning government parties.

Scholars have given increased attention to populist parties in rural regions and to discontent in ‘left-behind’ places and the ‘places that don’t matter’ (Cramer, 2016; Mitsch, Lee, & Morrow, 2021; Munis, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). A body of literature broadly focused on what we can call ‘the geography of discontent’ examines both the causes and effects of resentment in rural and post-industrial regions. It extends Soja’s (2013) argument for spatial justice, which posits that spatial inequalities should be fully considered when creating a socially just society. Literature on place-based and rural resentment suggests that people in rural regions feel ignored by political elites (Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2020). Some scholars have challenged the idea of ‘left-behind’ rural populations as fuelling the turn to right-wing populism; scholars in the US, for instance, have shown that supporters of Donald Trump are not particularly poor or disadvantaged relative to urban

populations; moreover, far from being political neglected, rural areas are highly overrepresented in Congress (Gaynor & Gimpel, 2021). But others have continued to give credence to the idea of rural neglect and discontent (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Massetti and Schakel (2015), for instance, argue that national governments favor economic development in rich regions without providing poor regions with sufficient funding to close the development gap. Subsequently, they compare the internal economic differences in a country to imperial differences between a metropolitan state and its colonies (Massetti & Schakel, 2015).

Dumont (2019) looks at the issue from a different angle, focusing not on the neglect of rural places but on the government's disproportionate investment in cities. From this perspective, urban regions' economic success may be based, in part, on their political overrepresentation and the power they wield. If politicians disproportionately live in heavily urbanized municipalities, these municipalities may benefit from extra attention and potentially better access to public funding compared to smaller municipalities (Ansolabehere, Gerber, & Snyder, 2002; Fiva & Halse, 2016). More public funding likely means better services and opportunities for the inhabitants of more urbanized municipalities (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015). Benefits could also come through more political attention, power, and networking advantages.

This paper examines unequal political representation across different regions in the tradition of earlier research (Latner & McGann, 2005; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004), giving attention to political mechanisms that allow material advantages to accrue disproportionately to urbanized areas. The Netherlands is a useful case to examine the existence of urban political overrepresentation and consequent benefits. The country has a proportional representation [PR] electoral system, in which political parties have candidate lists in one national district. Within such an electoral system, politicians from all backgrounds, theoretically at least, have an equal opportunity to enter parliament (Latner & McGann, 2005). The PR system in the Netherlands differs significantly from the British single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, in which all elected members of parliament represent a specific district.

The national legislature in the Netherlands may favor extremely urbanized municipalities over other municipalities (In the context of the Netherlands, 'extremely urbanized municipalities' are those with 2500 addresses or more per km<sup>2</sup>; fewer than 10 percent of the municipalities in the Netherlands fall into this category; Statistics Netherlands, 2020a, 2020b). The disparity in the level of police deployment serves as an example. Despite the increased shift in criminal activities from cities towards the countryside, the 2013 police reform in the Netherlands led

to increased police deployment in more urbanized municipalities and a decrease in other municipalities. Provincial governors collectively critiqued this policy and described the 'police-less countryside,' as a 'paradise for criminals' (Wiegant, 2017, p. 5). Different municipalities in the Netherlands may have unequal access to power and public funding (Van der Meulen, 2021), and research has already pointed to the higher lobbying power of more urbanized regions compared to rural regions (Meijers & Van der Wouw, 2019).

This paper investigates how the most urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands benefit from political overrepresentation. The paper explains how political overrepresentation may produce political benefits for overrepresented municipalities. First, the paper analyses the extent to which politicians who live in extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented in the national legislature. Second, it investigates how this overrepresentation yields political benefits by comparing differences in access to government funding between extremely urbanized and other municipalities. I am specifically interested in the money received by municipalities in the Netherlands from the 'region deals' and the public funding opportunities included in this program. After explaining the consequences of spatially concentrated political benefits, I present an agenda to further investigate the role of political overrepresentation and its relation to economic development and rural political discontent.

## 5.2 Theoretical perspectives on the effects of political overrepresentation

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Across the social sciences, evidence supports the notion that political overrepresentation yields material benefits for the overrepresented group. If a disproportionate number of politicians share your social background, the government is more likely to understand and pay attention to your problems and to empathize with your needs and desires (Bovens & Wille, 2017). The social backgrounds of politicians 'matter for their views and actions in the political system, above and beyond the party platforms on which they were elected' (Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020, p. 421). Therefore, political overrepresentation helps advance the interests of the overrepresented group by introducing policies that benefit them (Bovens & Wille, 2017). Thomassen and Andeweg (2004) show that many parliamentarians in the Netherlands not only claim to represent the interests of their party or individual voters, but also to represent the interests of the region where they come from and people of the same gender, ethnicity, and profession as themselves. Consequently, politically overrepresented groups are more likely to benefit disproportionately from governmental policy decisions (Espírito-Santo, Freire, & Serra-Silva, 2020; Pande, 2003), while underrepresented groups are more likely to feel excluded and disengage from politics (Bird, Saalfeld, & Wüst, 2010; Gilardi, 2015).

Political overrepresentation and its concomitant policy effects may also be relevant with respect to places along the urban/rural continuum. The overrepresentation of municipalities characterized by a specific degree of urbanization within the national political arena is likely to benefit the inhabitants of these municipalities. Similarly, the interests of citizens from underrepresented municipalities are likely to be less understood and acted upon, hindering their social and economic development.

Research on the geographical effects of political overrepresentation on public spending demonstrates that politicians favor their region and place of residence. Ansolabehere et al. (2002) illustrate that overrepresented counties in American states tend to receive disproportionate funding. Knight (2008) shows how states with relatively small populations receive more funding in the Senate, where they are overrepresented, than in the House of Representatives, where they are not. Fiva and Halse (2016) apply this to the regional context and show that regional governments in Norway spend more money in towns where many members of the coalition parties live. Harjunen, Saarimaa, and Tukiainen (2021) focus on a local context and show that in amalgamating Finnish municipalities, more public jobs will concentrate in

the politically overrepresented parts of the municipality. These authors show that politicians, as might be expected, tend to favor the places they represent. This paper considers whether this process extends even further—that is, whether politicians are generally inclined to favor not only their own places of residence, but also the types of municipalities where they live.

### 5.2.1 **Political benefits for urban municipalities and the geography of discontent**

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French scholars who study the geography of discontent argue that power is concentrated in more urbanized municipalities and that this, in turn, supports their economic development (Dumont, 2019; Guilluy, 2019). Dumont (2019) argues that French urban regions partly rely on political benefits to create growth, explaining that public investments are the most crucial reason urban regions outperform rural regions economically. Despite their clear contribution to urban economic growth, these public investments are not explicitly accounted for when analyzing the economic success of urban regions. Instead of being considered an economic stimulus by the government, the effects of the investments are attributed to the inherent economic qualities of urban places (Dumont, 2019).

There is also emergent academic attention to rural political discontent generated by spatial inequality in France. Guilluy (2016) explains how gentrification forces the lower middle classes out of the cities, concentrating power among the old upper class and the upper middle class (Guilluy, 2019). While these elites experience problems in urban France in their daily life, they are less aware of the problems in peripheral France. In this respect, poor people in more urbanized municipalities can be said to be better off than those municipalities outside of major urban cores. They have the political benefit that their problems are at least likelier to be noted by the elites. Guilluy (2016) rightfully foresaw the yellow vest protests as rural revolts against the urban-based elites. Likewise, the support for Trump and Brexit in rural and post-industrial regions is often understood as an attempt by voters from 'left-behind' regions to make themselves heard (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Cramer (2016), for instance, describes how rural inhabitants of the US state of Wisconsin experience a lack of attention from urban political elites. Munis (2020) likewise shows that in the United States, rural citizens have relatively higher levels of place-based resentment and are more critical of the national politicians who govern them. McKay, Jennings, and Stoker (2021) add that rural citizens feel socially deprived. These insights call for greater attention to how feelings of rural resentment and processes of political under- and overrepresentation emerge across a variety of political systems and contexts.

## 5.2.2 The Electoral System and municipal financing in the Netherlands

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It is well-established that political overrepresentation creates benefits for overrepresented groups, but it is essential to understand the different ways electoral systems produce the overrepresentation of specific groups. In the case of this paper, overrepresentation applies to specific types of municipalities, whose inhabitants together form a group with a shared geographic background. In the Netherlands, there is a single national electoral district, and each vote is weighted equally within the PR electoral. The Dutch parliament has 150 seats, which means that all parties that reach at least 1/150 of the valid votes are elected to parliament. The number of seats each party wins almost perfectly reflects its vote share. Even small parties will have MPs elected (Gallagher, Lever, & Mair, 2011). The MPs selected to serve in parliament come from candidate lists produced by each party; these candidates do not represent specific geographical constituencies. The party leader tops the list, and a committee within the party decides on the order of remaining candidates on the list.

In most parties, members can influence this process (Gallagher et al., 2011). Parties may try to create balanced candidate lists, weighing multiple factors such as the candidates' field of expertise, gender, age, ethnicity, as well as region (Andeweg, 2005, p.501). While regional identities may factor into a candidate's position on the party list, a candidate's position on the party list does not hinge on gaining support from voters in a specific area. Only preference votes can alter the list order. With preference votes, a candidate obtains 25 percent of the electoral threshold of 0.67 percent to be directly elected. Usually, only a few politicians get elected through this mechanism, and sometimes the preference votes they receive are based on their regional support (Nagtzaam & Louwerse, 2023). Most votes usually go to the party leader, which is a significant difference from systems that elect politicians within geographical constituencies (Latner & McGann, 2005).

To understand the dynamics of geographical over- and underrepresentation in the Netherlands, we also need to consider mechanisms of public investment in urban and rural municipalities. Heinelt and Hlepas (2006) describe three European systems of local government. According to their typology, Southern European municipalities belong to the *Franco* group (named after its Napoleonic roots). These tend to be relatively small and have low political and financial autonomy. Municipalities in Ireland and the United Kingdom belong to the *Anglo* group. They have a weak legal and political status but relatively high public service responsibilities (Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006). Finally, there is the *North and Middle European* group, to which municipalities in the Netherlands belong. They have a relatively high level of political

and fiscal autonomy. *Subsidiarity* is the guiding principle. This is the idea that governmental responsibility should be concentrated within the lowest possible level of government (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991). Kersting and Vetter (2013) confirm this division between European regions but also observe one key difference in the fiscal autonomy of municipalities. High local political autonomy often coincides with high local fiscal autonomy. However, in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the fiscal autonomy of local governments (i.e. municipalities in the context of the Netherlands) is relatively low (Kersting & Vetter, 2013).

Municipalities with high political and low fiscal autonomy require specific funding instruments from the national government. The small amount of taxes they can impose is insufficient to cover their vast number of political tasks (Kersting & Vetter, 2013). The national funding for municipalities in the Netherlands falls into three categories. First, there is non-earmarked funding for municipal tasks, which gives municipalities some freedom over spending (Korthals Altes, 2002; OECD, 2020). Second, there is earmarked funding for specific tasks. Municipalities should spend this money on prescribed aims set by the national government (OECD, 2020). Third, there are matching grants. This is earmarked or non-earmarked funding from the national government, which is then 'matched' with an equal or greater amount of funding from the subnational government. Matching grants have become popular in the United Kingdom, leading to 'deals' between the national and local governments over where to spend public money (O'Brien & Pike, 2015). The Netherlands also increasingly uses a matching grant system and 'deals' with municipalities (Agenda Stad, 2020a; Rijksoverheid, 2020a). Critiques of this approach question the transparency of public funding for municipalities. Decision-making around the allocation of matching grant funds to municipalities is not entirely transparent (Bruinenberg, 2018). Nonetheless, the deals reveal that different kinds of municipalities have varying degrees of access to national government funds through matching grants.

### 5.2.3 Conceptual Model

The remainder of this article considers the interaction between the parliamentary electoral system and the municipal financing system in the Netherlands. The question is whether particular kinds of geographies (on a rural-urban continuum) are politically overrepresented in the parliament of the Netherlands, and whether this overrepresentation may produce benefits for more urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants. Access to public funding would be an example of these benefits. Figure 5.1 shows how I am conceptualizing mechanisms of overrepresentation. We can hypothesize that political overrepresentation theoretically translates into benefits such as political attention, power, and increased access to public funding for extremely urbanized municipalities. In other words, politicians from an overrepresented geographical unit will direct attention and funding towards similar kinds of places.



FIG. 5.1 Theoretical effects of political overrepresentation

Increased access to public funding may also lead to economic and social benefits for a certain subset of citizens by generating economic development (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015). A relatively high level of public funding for 'extremely urbanized municipalities', in particular, may help them to improve upon the economic growth they would have achieved without increased attention from the national government (Dumont, 2019). Therefore, political overrepresentation may support the economic success of certain municipalities.

## 5.3 Urban political overrepresentation in the Netherlands

To investigate potential place-based overrepresentation, I consider the degree of urbanization within each municipality in the Netherlands. Intuitively, the population size of the municipality would be an appropriate measure. However, the population size does not always reflect how ‘urbanized’ municipalities are. The process of municipal amalgamation in the Netherlands has created large and relatively rural municipalities with many inhabitants, which do not always have a large central city or town (Allers, De Natris, Rienks, & De Greef, 2021). The degree of urbanization within each municipality is therefore more helpful in measuring political urban overrepresentation. Statistics Netherlands (2020a) classifies municipalities in the Netherlands into five categories concerning their degree of urbanization (Table 5.1). This is based on the average density of addresses within a 1-km distance of all the addresses within a municipality (Statistics Netherlands, 2020a). These categories can be used to group together municipalities from throughout the country and to assess the impacts of government policies on certain kinds of municipalities. Figure 5.2 shows how the municipalities are divided across the country.

TABLE 5.1 Categories of municipalities in the Netherlands. Source: Statistics Netherlands (2020a).

Degree of urbanization of municipalities	Addresses per km <sup>2</sup>
Not urbanized	<500
Hardly urbanized	500 – 1,000
Moderately urbanized	1,000 – 1,500
Strongly urbanized	1,500 – 2,500
Extremely urbanized	>2,500

I then use the place of residence of politicians on the national political level in the Netherlands to account for political overrepresentation. Previous research on the economic effects of political overrepresentation also used the place of residence of politicians to measure the extent to which politicians favor these places (Ansolabehere et al., 2002; Harjunen et al., 2021). Literature on ‘friends and neighbors voting’ shows that political candidates often get support from voters who live in their region, especially in rural municipalities and smaller cities (Herron & Lynch, 2019; Key, 1949).

**Degree of Urbanization**

- Extremely Urbanized
- Strongly Urbanized
- Moderately Urbanized
- Hardly Urbanized
- Not Urbanized

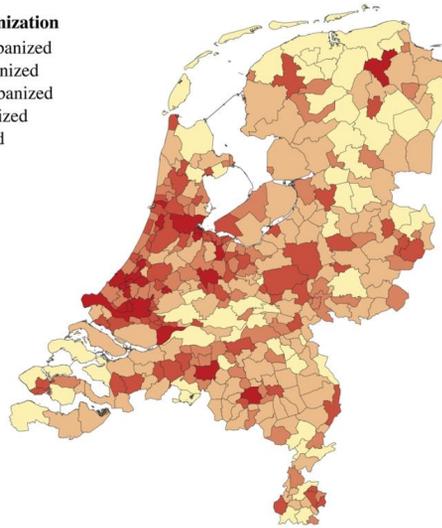


FIG. 5.2 Degree of urbanization by municipality in the Netherlands, 2019. Source: Statistics Netherlands (2020b).

In October 2017, the Netherlands had 249 politicians at the national level. This included the 24 members of the Cabinet, the 150 members of the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer), and the 75 members of the Senate (Eerste Kamer). These politicians decide on the national government's policies (Gallagher et al., 2011). By October 31, 2017, the new Rutte Cabinet had been formed, and those MPs and senators who had taken a seat in the cabinet had been replaced by members who used to be lower on the party list. The members of the cabinet, House of Representatives, and Senate would decide on upcoming governmental policies and laws. Therefore, this is a helpful moment to examine urban political overrepresentation and how this relates to benefits for overrepresented municipalities. The place of residence of national politicians in the Netherlands is publicly available on governmental websites (Kiesraad, 2015; Kiesraad, 2017; Parlementair Documentatie Centrum [PDC], 2023). This enables the analysis of which places of varying degrees of urbanization are politically overrepresented or underrepresented. I was able to identify addresses for all but one (248 out of 249) of the country's national politicians (Kiesraad, 2015; Kiesraad, 2017; PDC, 2023). To investigate whether these politicians represented the voters during the 2017 election, I performed goodness-of-fit tests. A p-value in this test lower than 0.05 means that political representation deviates significantly from the size of the electorate.

**TABLE 5.2** Voters and politicians in each category of Degree of Urbanization. Sources: Statistics Netherlands (2020b; 2020c); Kiesraad (2015); Kiesraad (2017); PDC (2023).

Degree of urbanization	Number of votes (2017)	Percentage of voters (2017)	Expected number of national politicians	Observed number of national politicians
Not urbanized	880,545	8	20	7
Hardly urbanized	2,410,546	23	57	28
Moderately urbanized	1,639,298	16	40	23
Strongly urbanized	3,203,979	30	74	67
Extremely urbanized	2,388,415	23	57	123
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,469,618</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>248</b>

As one can discern from Table 5.2, politicians who reside in extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented at the national political level. The p-value is under 0.001. Extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented insofar as they have more than double the number of politicians at the national level than one would expect from their voter share. Additionally, all other categories have fewer MPs than one would expect from their voter share. Not urbanized and hardly urbanized municipalities are the most underrepresented at the national political level in the Netherlands, while extremely urbanized municipalities are heavily overrepresented. Prior national elections in the Netherlands displayed a similar pattern (Kiesraad, 2006; Kiesraad, 2010; Kiesraad, 2012).

It is also valuable to show the situation for national politicians from governing parties. These politicians had the most influence on public funding decisions between 2017 and 2021 when there was a government with a narrow majority that consisted of politicians from four parties: the classical-liberal VVD (n=55), the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) (n=37), the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66) (n=35), and the Christian-social Christian Union [CU] (n=11). Table 5.3 shows how politicians from these parties represented their electorates during the 2017 general election in different categories of urbanization.

**TABLE 5.3** Percentage of voters and politicians for parties per degree of urbanization. Sources: Kiesraad (2017); PDC (2023); Kiesraad (2015).

Degree of urbanization (2019)	Number of votes (2017)	Percentage of votes per category (2017)	Percentage of total votes per party (2017)	Percentage of national politicians per party (2020)
<b>Not urbanized</b>				
VVD	180,254	20.5	8.1	3.6
CDA	160,890	18.3	12.4	8.1
D66	76,902	8.7	6.0	2.8
CU	38,535	4.4	10.8	0.0
<b>Total (including opposition)</b>	<b>880,545</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>8.4</b>	<b>2.8</b>
<b>Hardly urbanized</b>				
VVD	545,377	22.6	24.4	18.2
CDA	407,230	16.9	31.3	18.9
D66	229,924	9.5	17.9	5.7
CU	94,959	3.9	26.7	0.0
<b>Total (including opposition)</b>	<b>2,410,546</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>23.0</b>	<b>11.2</b>
<b>Moderately urbanized</b>				
VVD	400,851	24.5	17.9	12.7
CDA	236,653	14.4	18.2	16.2
D66	183,781	11.2	14.3	2.8
CU	55,553	3.4	15.6	0.0
<b>Total (including opposition)</b>	<b>1,639,298</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>9.2</b>
<b>Strongly urbanized</b>				
VVD	679,929	21.2	30.4	20.0
CDA	341,444	10.7	26.2	29.7
D66	399,046	12.5	31.0	14.3
CU	111,913	3.5	31.4	54.5
<b>Total (including opposition)</b>	<b>3,203,979</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>30.6</b>	<b>26.9</b>
<b>Extremely urbanized</b>				
VVD	431,524	18.1	19.3	43.6
CDA	152,998	6.4	11.8	27.0
D66	395,297	16.6	30.7	74.3
CU	55,211	2.3	15.5	45.5
<b>Total (including opposition)</b>	<b>2,388,415</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>22.8</b>	<b>49.4</b>
<b>Total votes and percentages</b>				
VVD	2,238,351	21.4	100.0	98.1*
CDA	1,301,796	12.4	100.0	99.9
D66	1,285,819	12.3	100.0	99.9
CU	356,271	3.4	100.0	100.0
<b>Total (including opposition)</b>	<b>10,469,618</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>99.1</b>

\*Not always 100.0%. Some senators are not registered in the Netherlands, and there can be rounding differences.

As Table 5.3 shows, national politicians from the governing parties were, in geographical terms, overrepresenting voters in extremely urbanized municipalities. All governing parties had relatively more politicians than voters who resided in this category of municipality. This was seldom the case in municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization. For example, the CU had no national politicians who resided in moderately, hardly, or not urbanized municipalities, although 53.1% of their electorate lived in such a municipality.

## 5.4 Political benefits because of political overrepresentation

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Now that I have established the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities, it is also important to determine if this overrepresentation affects policies for municipalities with different degrees of urbanization. I do this by investigating municipalities' access to public funding by degree of urbanization. As mentioned earlier, municipalities in the Netherlands combine high political autonomy with low fiscal autonomy. Compared to other European countries, they are relatively autonomous in policymaking (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991; Kersting & Vetter, 2013). However, the national government is the most important funder of municipalities in the Netherlands (Allers & Vermeulen, 2016). When investigating whether extremely urbanized municipalities receive political benefits, it is crucial to understand how the national government functions and funds municipalities.

The Netherlands always has coalition governments consisting of multiple parties. The Rutte-III cabinet was formed in 2017 after lengthy negotiations. During the negotiation process, expert MPs from coalition parties worked out the details of their policy area on side tables, next to the party leaders' main negotiation table. During the tenure of the cabinet, these expert MPs were also involved in so-called 'cockpit talks,' in which they discussed policy solutions with the responsible cabinet ministers (Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021). The latter sometimes took a back seat, a process described as the 'governmentalisation of parliament' (Koole, 2018). Hence, although cabinet ministers formally decided, MPs from government parties could have been involved in discussions on how municipalities could access national government funding. Politically overrepresented, extremely urbanized municipalities may have benefited from this situation.

The municipal fund (Gemeentefonds) of the Netherlands is the most important funding instrument of the national government for municipalities. It consists of non-earmarked grants. Municipalities have considerable autonomy over how to spend these grants (Rijksoverheid, 2020b). The funding per municipality is based on a model that takes multiple elements into account, such as the geographical size of the municipality, the number of inhabitants, and their socio-economic and demographic characteristics (Allers & Vermeulen, 2016; Rijksoverheid, 2020b). For example, a younger population means increased costs for school buildings and childcare, whereas a larger population likely leads to higher local infrastructure costs. Precisely how the municipal fund is divided is the subject of technical debates, with both more urbanized and less urbanized municipalities claiming that they should receive a larger share of the funding (Bekkers, 2020; Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, 2019).

Next to the municipal fund, municipalities can receive earmarked (or specific) grants from the national government (Allers & Vermeulen, 2016). For example, municipalities can receive money to improve air quality or to reduce educational backlogs amongst children in their municipality. Municipalities must spend specific grants directly on the specific issue for which the funds have been granted (Rijksoverheid, 2020c).

In addition, the national government of the Netherlands increasingly uses matching grants to fund municipalities. In 2015, the national government introduced 'city deals', a set of arrangements on one specific topic between the national government and multiple urban municipalities. However, other public or private partners may join (Agenda Stad, 2020a). Ordinarily, all involved partners contribute to funding the city deal (Hamers, Dignum, & Evers, 2017). City deals have been made around more sustainable cities, urban development, and health (Agenda Stad, 2020a).

In 2017, the coalition agreement of the Rutte III cabinet also introduced '*region deals*', which were the result of the coalition negotiations. As the name suggests, a region deal involves a specific region, rather than multiple cities that may be located far from each other. It aims to tackle multiple issues through an integrated plan for which the national and lower levels of government provide funding. A region, consisting of one or more cooperating provinces and/or municipalities, can make a bid for a region deal when a new tranche of funding becomes available (Schouten, 2018).

The region deals were presented as supportive to municipalities outside the central and urban regions. The responsible cabinet minister stated, 'This government is there for the whole of the Netherlands' and 'wants to improve the country, especially for those who feel that the government is not there for them.' (Mulder, 2020; Schouten, 2018, 2019). It was also an explicit goal to divide the funding equally over the country (Tweede Kamer, 2020). The region deals cover a wide range of

topics, such as sustainability, education quality, or renewal of the housing supply. The requirements for receiving public funding through a region deal are unspecific. A region deal should cover multiple topics, contribute to 'broad regional welfare,' and have sufficient funding from provinces and municipalities (Rijksdienst voor ondernemend Nederland [RVO], 2019; Rijksoverheid, 2020a). Ultimately, the cabinet formally decides which requests for public funding via the region deals are granted. Regions cannot protest the decision; nor does the cabinet openly publish why regions are selected (RVO, 2022). This makes the considerations less transparent, suggesting more room for lobbying. Rural regions in the Netherlands, which include fewer extremely urbanized municipalities, tend to have less lobbying power than their more urbanized counterparts (Meijers & Van der Wouw, 2019). Hence, the overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities among national politicians from governing parties also increases the likelihood that financial benefits will accrue disproportionately to extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants.

Recent governmental policies underscore how rural municipalities are far from being favored by the national government of the Netherlands. For example, Ubels, Bock, and Haartsen (2019) explain how severe budget cuts on municipalities led to the centralization of municipal services and facilities in core towns, thus reducing public services in rural villages. Van der Meulen (2021) describes how rural municipalities in regions dealing with depopulation lack sufficient funding. A recent advisory report, which the national government endorsed, specifically mentioned the long-term lack of attention from the national government for problems in rural municipalities (Remkes, 2022).

Notwithstanding the city and region deals, the national government also increasingly makes individual arrangements with municipalities on specific topics. The funding for these generally matching and/or earmarked grants comes from the Municipal Fund. Access to individual arrangements relies on political attention from the national government or legislature and the ability of municipalities to garner funding from these institutions (ROB, 2019). Therefore, individual arrangements weaken both the transparency of governmental funding for municipalities in the Netherlands and the political autonomy of the latter (Bruinenberg, 2018).

To examine the effects of urban political overrepresentation, it is vital to investigate the access of municipalities to funding from the national government and analyze how this relates to the political representation of municipalities based on their level of urbanization. Having more options to access public funding also increases the likelihood of receiving funding. This funding from the national government can be used to improve the lives of the inhabitants of the overrepresented municipalities. It thus also matters how much funding municipalities receive from specific grants and region deals. Therefore, the analysis focuses on both the amount of funding and the mode of

access to funding. This is operationalized in the following two topics: 1) the content and distribution of the region deals and 2) the access that municipalities have to different types of grants from the national government. This operationalization also reveals how national politicians respond to problems in different categories of municipalities.

## 5.5 The differing focus within the region deals

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This section analyses the volume of public funding municipalities with varying degrees of urbanization receive from the region deals. As mentioned earlier, the general criteria for applying for region deals call into question the transparency and fairness of the decision-making process. Contributing to 'broad regional welfare', for instance, is difficult to measure (Rijksoverheid, 2020a; RVO, 2019), and the decision-making considerations of the cabinet are not published. This section does not focus on the decision-making process but, rather, considers the outcome of the region deal allocation process.

The initial discourse about the region deals suggested they would primarily support the countryside and aim for an equal distribution over the country (Tweede Kamer, 2020). This leads to the expectation that municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization receive at least equal funding in comparison to more urbanized municipalities based on their population share. However, the granted deals in the first two tranches show a different pattern. Already within the coalition agreement, the government decided to spend most of the money in the first tranche of the region deals in more urbanized municipalities (Mulder, 2020; Regeerakkoord, 2017). From the outset, then, there has been a marked difference between the tone that was struck and the actual content of the region deals.

Table 5.4 shows the manifesto commitments of the four governing parties of Cabinet Rutte-III and what was negotiated in the coalition agreement. The CU, CDA, and D66 were making the most direct promise to create region deals. CU and CDA emphasized the importance of more investments in depopulating regions lacking extremely urbanized municipalities. Unsurprisingly, not urbanized and hardly urbanized municipalities are overrepresented among the CU and CDA electorate (see Table 5.3). D66, which disproportionately represents voters from 'extremely urbanized' municipalities, argued for investing in regions. This came next to their plans to invest in the 'vital cities' (D66, 2016) where they have strong electoral support. VVD, which has an equal representation across municipalities with different degrees of urbanization, had a clear manifesto focusing on urban investments.

Eventually, the coalition agreement contained region deals, but with a focus on investing in regions with extremely urbanized municipalities, such as Eindhoven and Rotterdam (Regeerakkoord, 2017). Ostensibly, the CU, CDA, and D66 won the process argument to create a system of region deals. However, despite a tone of support for the countryside being struck, the content of the first and most crucial tranche was targeted at VVD priorities. The U-turn of CDA, D66, and CU may be explained by the political overrepresentation of politicians from extremely urbanized municipalities among the national politicians who had negotiated this compromise. The coalition agreement thus provides an important explanation for the difference in tone and content of the region deals. The unexpectedly high funding for extremely urbanized municipalities supports the idea of political benefits for the types of municipalities that are politically overrepresented.

**TABLE 5.4** Positions of coalition parties and coalition agreement on region deals, 2017. Sources: VVD (2016); CDA (2016); D66 (2016); ChristenUnie (2016); Regeerakkoord (2017).

Position on regional investments	
VVD	'We have a number of strong regions, such as Brainport Eindhoven, Foodvalley Wageningen, Energyport Northern Netherlands and the economic centers in the Randstad conurbation... We want the government's policy to focus on a strategy to increase the competitiveness of the Dutch urban regions.'
CDA	Economic challenges are increasingly occurring at a regional level and they differ per region... In depopulating regions, we ensure policies that stimulate and retain employment... We see new opportunities for these regions through better cooperation, targeted investments and a solution-oriented attitude from governments... We want more attention to the quality of life in areas outside cities.'
D66	'D66 wants regions to take the lead in boosting success clusters... Many social, economic and spatial developments take place on a larger scale than the municipality, in the region... In addition to strong cities, D66 invests in vital regions. This responds strongly to the different economic challenges per region.'
Christian Union	'The Christian Union wants an investment program for regions... We want to maintain and, if possible, strengthen employment in the region ... The national government, together with the local and provincial authorities, can strengthen the regional economy... Structural strengthening of the economy and achievable facilities keep depopulating regions liveable.'
Coalition agreement	'In this government's term of office, a total of 900 million euros will be reserved for tackling regional problems and bottlenecks, including nuclear issues... Zeeland, Eindhoven, Rotterdam South... The national government makes 'deals' with decentralized authorities, in which they commit to cooperate on new solutions.'

The estimated funding in Table 5.5 shows that extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented amongst recipients of the region deals. Sixteen deals have been granted in the first two tranches (Rijksoverheid, 2020a). Extremely urbanized municipalities receive double what their population share justifies [+100%]. Moderately urbanized (+0%) and not urbanized municipalities (+4%) receive what one would expect given their population share. However, hardly urbanized [-45%] and strongly urbanized municipalities [-46%] receive considerably less than expected,

given their share of the total population. This shows that especially the extremely urbanized municipalities, which are the only category with political overrepresentation in terms of place of residence, benefit disproportionately from the region deals.

**TABLE 5.5** Estimated funding from closed region deals for each degree of urbanization. Sources: Rijksoverheid (2020a); RVO (2019); Statistics Netherlands (2020c).

Degree of Urbanization	Expected funding as share of population (in million euros)	Actual funding (in million euros)	Difference between actual and expected funding
Not urbanized	44	45.9	+4%
Hardly urbanized	121	66	-45%
Moderately urbanized	82.5	82.3	+0%
Strongly urbanized	170.5	91.4	-46%
Extremely urbanized	132	264.4	+100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>550.0</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>0%</b>

Interestingly, the electorate in extremely urbanized municipalities is not necessarily government-leaning. VVD, CU, and, especially, CDA, perform stronger in less urbanized municipalities. Only D66 has an electorate that tends to favor extremely urbanized municipalities. Compared to municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization, the governing parties received the lowest vote share in extremely urbanized municipalities during the 2017 election (see Table 5.3). However, these municipalities are heavily overrepresented among the national politicians from governing parties.

In addition, the small volume of funding hampers the ability of the region deals to achieve the ambitious goals behind the policy program. Over €100 million per deal went to two region deals within the first tranche, which were already proposed in the coalition agreement. These cover Rotterdam South, which is extremely urbanized, and Brainport Eindhoven, in which municipalities are extremely and strongly urbanized (Regeerakkoord, 2017; Rijksoverheid, 2020a; Statistics Netherlands, 2020c). A maximum of €40 million per deal was available for the remaining deals, which were going to regions that covered more municipalities. In the case of the region deal in Midden- and West-Brabant, a €10 million grant was supposed to solve multiple problems in 25 municipalities ranging from not urbanized to extremely urbanized (Rijksoverheid, 2019). With such small grants from the national government, it becomes tough to achieve the ambitious goal of 'broader welfare' within each region (Bruinenberg, 2018; Mulder, 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2020a; RVO, 2019). As this section has shown, the volume of public funding that municipalities receive from the region deals is disproportionately high for extremely urbanized municipalities. Especially in later tranches, the funding volume may be too limited to achieve the ambitious policy goals behind the region deals.

## 5.6 Differences in requesting grants from the national government

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This section examines the extent to which municipalities with varying degrees of urbanization have access to public funding from the national government. It analyses the accessibility of city deals, region deals, and specific grants provided for certain kinds of problems. Extremely urbanized municipalities, I will show, have benefits over other types of municipalities for three reasons.

First, during the investigated period, almost all extremely urbanized and some strongly urbanized municipalities had an additional option to request funding from the national government through the city deal. Only members of the G4 and the G40 can apply for city deals. The G4 is the network of the four most populous municipalities of the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, and Utrecht (Dukes & Van der Wusten, 2014). The G40 is a network of 40 medium and large municipalities (G40, 2020). These networks also help decide which topics the city deals will cover in the upcoming period. Almost all municipalities in the G4 and G40 are either extremely urbanized or strongly urbanized (G40, 2020; Statistics Netherlands, 2020c). Hence, the city deals provide an additional opportunity to request funding from the national government for almost all extremely urbanized municipalities and about one-third of the strongly urbanized municipalities.

Second, access to city deals has given urban municipalities a networking advantage. Besides access to public funding, the process around the city deals aims to 'improve the access of urban municipalities to relevant policymakers who work within the national government' (Agenda Stad, 2020b, p.2). The system of city deals thus helps most of the extremely urbanized municipalities and 26 strongly urbanized municipalities to strengthen their networks within the national government. This, in turn, may have led to favorable policy decisions from the cabinet that go beyond the specific city deal, such as more individual arrangements on specific topics. For example, the cabinet may become aware of educational backlogs in an extremely urbanized municipality and fund their ambition to reduce these. This would benefit the inhabitants of these municipalities.

Third, extremely urbanized municipalities have easier access to some specific grants from the national government than other types of municipalities. In some instances, this makes sense. For example, certain public services or social problems are likelier to occur in extremely urbanized municipalities. However, the easier access to specific grants becomes problematic when it applies to topics where one would expect

equal treatment of extremely urbanized and other categories of municipalities. This becomes clear when comparing the national government's approach to the teacher shortage in cities with the shortage of general practitioners in the countryside. Recently, the national government announced a €116 million budget to combat the shortage of teachers in the extremely urbanized G4 municipalities and the strongly urbanized municipality of Almere (Rijksoverheid, 2020d). Conversely, the national government did not budget to combat the shortage of general practitioners in the countryside of the Netherlands, which has been especially problematic in hardly or not urbanized municipalities (Christiaanse, 2020; Statistics Netherlands, 2020c). The €116 million allocated to reducing the teacher shortage in the G4 and Almere also sharply contrasts with the much smaller funding allocated through the region deals.

The different response of the national government to the shortage of teachers and the shortage of general practitioners is in line with the varying amount of attention paid to both problems in parliament. In the first three years after the 2017 election, the term 'teacher shortage' ('lerarentekort') has been mentioned on 88 different days of plenary sessions (Tweede Kamer, 2021a). The parliamentary attention paid to the teacher shortage probably forced the national government to act and spend €116 million on this issue. The politicians who placed the teacher shortage on the agenda generally live in extremely urbanized municipalities (Kiesraad, 2017). Conversely, the term 'shortage of general practitioners' ('huisartsentekort') was mentioned on only two different days of plenary sessions (Tweede Kamer, 2021b). Unsurprisingly, this did not lead to earmarked grants for rural municipalities to diminish the shortage of general practitioners. The response was that regions should solve the issue themselves (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport [VWS], 2019; VWS, 2020). The lack of national politicians from hardly urbanized and not urbanized municipalities may explain the lack of attention and money accorded to this problem. Among the members of parliament who deal with healthcare issues, hardly- and not urbanized municipalities are scarcely represented (Kiesraad, 2017).

Extremely urbanized municipalities thus have benefits over other municipalities. The national government provides them with more public funding opportunities and an advantageous networking position. Furthermore, the contrasting responses of the national government to the shortage of urban teachers and the shortage of rural general practitioners demonstrate that extremely urbanized municipalities have easier access to specific grants from the national government than hardly urbanized or not urbanized municipalities. However similar these problems appear, what is good for the goose appears to be bad for the gander. Political overrepresentation may explain the benefits of access to public funding for extremely urbanized municipalities because national politicians have actively enabled city deals and demanded specific grants to solve specific urban problems.

Furthermore, the increasing volume of individual arrangements between the national government and individual municipalities on specific topics is more difficult for politically underrepresented municipalities. If funding for municipalities becomes less dependent on general requirements, then there is an increased opportunity for favoritism. Consequently, access to specific grants, especially matching grants, such as the region deals, becomes easier for those with strong networks and good lobbying skills. It provides space for ‘friends and neighbor voting’ that favors overrepresented municipalities. Previous research has shown that politically overrepresented regions tend to profit from solid network contacts and regional or local favoritism, which helps them receive more public funding (Fiva & Halse, 2016; Knight, 2008; Sørensen, 2003). A further increase in individual arrangements will thus likely strengthen the opportunities available to politically overrepresented municipalities. In the case of the Netherlands, this would help extremely urbanized municipalities. Hence, although it promises to help underrepresented municipalities, using systems such as the region deals may hamper the opportunities within the regions it seeks to support.

## 5.7 Discussion & Conclusion

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I have described in this article how urban political overrepresentation helps to create political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants, by analysing access to public funding. It is important to stress that the findings in this paper suggest associations rather than causal relationships. To prove the latter, more systematic forms of research are required. However, the correlation between political overrepresentation and access to public funding may serve as a first indication of excessive political benefits for the most highly urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants.

National politicians in the Netherlands overwhelmingly reside in extremely urbanized municipalities and, to a lesser extent, in municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization. Between 2017 and 2020, extremely urbanized municipalities were overrepresented amongst the places of residence of national politicians in the Netherlands. This political overrepresentation may have influenced the policies of the government in the Netherlands. Although politicians from extremely urbanized municipalities do not openly claim to represent their interests specifically, these municipalities have had more and easier access to funding opportunities

than other municipalities. As the region deals illustrate, extremely urbanized municipalities benefitted disproportionately from a public funding program that ministers had promised would rectify the existing unequal division of public funding (Schouten, 2018). Their political overrepresentation thus provides extremely urbanized municipalities with unearned advantages in the form of political benefits.

The findings of this research align with existing research on political overrepresentation and the emergent literature on the geography of discontent. Political overrepresentation has already been shown on the regional level (Latner & McGann, 2005; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004) and is now shown through categories of municipalities. Political overrepresentation has proven to produce better access to public funding for the overrepresented group in multiple contexts (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Gilardi, 2015; Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020). Political-economic research has shown how this applies to geographical regions (Ansolabehere et al., 2002; Fiva & Halse, 2016; Knight, 2008). This paper shows that urban political overrepresentation creates a series of advantages for extremely urbanized municipalities, such as better access to public funding. This urban political overrepresentation may help to explain both economic inequality and resentment in municipalities with fewer political privileges. This supports earlier findings on rural resentment and the geography of discontent (Cramer, 2016; Dumont, 2019; Munis, 2020; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). Political overrepresentation adds another explanatory tool to these lines of thought. As most municipalities in the Netherlands are not extremely urbanized, the resentment may be more than just a rural-peripheral phenomenon and may span widely across the country. This is what the political victory of the Farmer Citizen Movement [BBB] seems to suggest (Bounds, 2023).

There are a variety of complementary explanations for the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities, beyond the simple observation of where politicians live. First, the location of parliament and government in the political capital of The Hague could explain the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities. The Hague and several surrounding municipalities are extremely urbanized (Statistics Netherlands, 2020b). Second, overrepresentation might be related to the location of universities in the Netherlands. National politicians may have stayed in the extremely urbanized university city where they studied. However, these explanations do not change the mechanism of political overrepresentation and its effects. Bovens and Wille (2017) argue that the existing political overrepresentation of highly educated citizens leads to policies favoring these citizens. This could also apply to the overrepresented municipalities in which these politicians live.

To be sure, better access to public funding may not be solely the result of urban political overrepresentation. But other plausible factors can still be related to political overrepresentation. Extremely urbanized municipalities, for instance, may have a higher return on investment for public funding and consequently may deserve better access to it (Glaeser, 2011). However, if one considers the redistributive and equity aims of domestic government spending, then one might expect that the amount each municipality receives from the Municipal Fund should reflect each municipality's actual needs (Allers & Vermeulen, 2016; Rijksoverheid, 2020b). This Municipal Fund is highly influential in the access to public funding for municipalities in the Netherlands. It was not within the scope of this paper to analyze its material impacts on the wellbeing of people living in certain kinds of municipalities. However, earlier research shows that small municipalities, which tend to be less urbanized, lack the funding to deliver sufficient social services to their inhabitants under the current budgets of the Municipal Fund (Van der Meulen, 2021). This could also be a result of political overrepresentation.

Extremely urbanized municipalities are also likely to be more effective at lobbying for investments than others. Meijers and Van der Wouw (2019) pointed at this phenomenon on the regional level. Municipalities are not merely passive victims of decisions by the national government but also active agents who impact these decisions (Gallagher et al., 2011). Extremely urbanized municipalities may have better-trained staff that can write qualitatively more robust requests for funding from the national government. Many municipalities are part of networks with other municipalities that are roughly the same size and share the same degree of urbanization. These networks lobby at multiple governmental levels for the interests of their municipalities (Dukes & Van der Wusten, 2014; G40, 2020). Effective lobbying and strong networks increase public funding accessibility (Sørensen, 2003). Prior research suggests lobbying tends to be more effective when lobbyists share characteristics and networks with their lobbying targets (Thomas & Hrebenar, 2009). Hence, urban political overrepresentation may lead to the accrual of benefits to extremely urbanized municipalities. The arguments that lobbyists from such municipalities would put forward would be more understandable for the politicians who live in the same category of municipalities.

Furthermore, the electoral system of the Netherlands (Latner & McGann, 2005) enables favoritism towards the type of municipalities that are also politically overrepresented. Friends and neighbors voting, which helps explain political capital in other countries (Herron & Lynch, 2019; Put, von Schoultz, & Isotalo, 2020), may be less effective in the Dutch system, which only has one national district. Since voters can come from throughout the country, it makes more sense for politicians to appeal to voters in comparable municipalities than in their home region or cities.

This can be done by improving public funding access for those municipalities. In this way, even individually underrepresented municipalities may profit from the overrepresentation of their category. The access to city deals for extremely urbanized and strongly urbanized municipalities and the specific grants for the teacher shortage serve as examples.

An important question arises from this study about the comparability of the Netherlands to other countries in Europe. Compared to other European countries, not urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands are geographically close to more urbanized ones (Eurostat, 2018). One may argue that this makes it a less useful example to test political urban overrepresentation. However, the PR electoral system of the Netherlands, with one district, highlights the importance of different categories of municipalities and encourages consideration of the ways certain types of places may be over- or under-represented regardless of election system (Latner & McGann, 2005). In other countries, political overrepresentation by urban category may also play a role in explaining the flow of government funds to certain places and groups. This may allow for a more subtle analysis than that suggested by the idea of 'internal colonialism' (Masseti & Schakel, 2015). This idea can only be tested on the regional level, whereas testing access to funding on the municipal level reveals differences between urban and rural places.

Future research can deepen the knowledge of the existence and consequences of political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities and politically overrepresented categories of places and people. As McIntosh (1988) introduced, the concept of 'privilege' could be a helpful angle to investigate the political benefits resulting from political overrepresentation.

Future research can also examine if urban political overrepresentation benefits all urban municipalities in the same category equally, or whether it favors particular municipalities that are better networked. Relatedly, we might ask if center-periphery relationships intersect in any ways within urban categories. Alongside this, researchers can investigate the impact of the geographical representation of party members upon the focus of their political parties. Finally, the potential economic and social benefits that individual citizens receive could be investigated. Who profits from urban political overrepresentation? And how do those profits become visible to those in underrepresented places? After all, what is at stake here is the creation of a more equal landscape of political benefits that can effectively counter place-based political resentment.

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# 6 Conclusions

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This dissertation is motivated by concerns about the future of young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. Therefore, it aims to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands, explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities and understand this in the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands. This chapter first synthesises the research findings. This provides the conclusions of the dissertation and explains how the research aim has been achieved. Next, this chapter reflects on the scholarly implications, in which the findings are related to the theoretical debates and research themes underpinning this dissertation. Consequently, it describes the implications for policy and society. Then, the research limitations and future research agenda are discussed. The chapter concludes with a final statement by the author.

TABLE 6.1 Overview of research aim, question and main finding.

Element of Research aim	Research question (chapter)	Main findings
To understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands	1) <i>What are the dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles in realising these dreams of young adults from urban and rural municipalities in the Netherlands, and how do these foreseen obstacles impact their life plans? (Chapter 2)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Many young Dutch adults dream of living in rural municipalities and outside settlements in fifteen years' time</li> <li>– The lack of available housing and career opportunities are the most foreseen obstacles to realizing this dream</li> <li>– These foreseen obstacles make the life plans of young adults more urban-oriented</li> </ul>
To explore opportunities to create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities	2) <i>How can the organisation of cultural festivals support rural development and regeneration in a rural municipality in the Netherlands? (Chapter 3)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Cultural festivals are locally supported, use local resources and benefit the municipality</li> <li>– Cultural festivals create interconnectedness and help reinvent the municipality</li> <li>– All festivals support regeneration, but community-led and private-led festivals are more supportive than public-led festivals</li> </ul>
	3) <i>To what extent can the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings support rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities in the Netherlands? (Chapter 4)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings helps to attract young adults and contributes to rural development</li> <li>– Successful commercial re-use requires involved local government and entrepreneurs</li> <li>– Commercial re-use cannot solve the issue of vacant farm buildings but may help</li> </ul>
To understand the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands	4) <i>To what extent is urban political overrepresentation constraining rural development and regeneration? (Chapter 5)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Extremely urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands are politically overrepresented</li> <li>– Better access to public funding benefits extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants</li> <li>– Rural development and regeneration is constrained by the lack of attention and funding from the national government, although the exact extent is not yet clear</li> </ul>

## 6.1 Synthesis of the main findings

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The answers to the research questions of this dissertation enable an interrelated outlook on the future of young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. This synthesis of the main findings explains how the research aim of the dissertation has been achieved and hence forms the conclusion. Young adults in the Netherlands show an apparent interest in residing and, to a lesser extent, working in rural municipalities. The residential rural dreams are often connected to lifestyle dreams. The life plans of these young adults become more urban-oriented because they foresee a lack of housing availability and, to a lesser extent, a lack of career opportunities in rural municipalities. (Chapter 2). These findings help to understand the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands.

Enabling these dreams asks for further attention to rural development and regeneration opportunities in rural municipalities. Two opportunities have been explored: rural cultural festivals and commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. Cultural festivals that are community-led or otherwise connected to the local community can regenerate a rural municipality. These festivals create economic benefits and help to reinvent an area. Despite only offering limited career opportunities, the achieved rural regeneration makes a rural municipality more attractive for young adults (Chapter 3). Commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings forms another opportunity for rural development in rural municipalities. It creates career opportunities and liveliness in deteriorating places. Involving local entrepreneurs and policymakers is critical to successful commercial re-use (Chapter 4). Across this dissertation, support can be found for the critical role of local communities in creating future opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. Embeddedness in the community makes rural municipalities attractive places of residence in dreams for the future of young adults (Chapter 2), helps cultural festivals to make more impact (Chapter 3) and supports successful commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings (Chapter 4).

To enable dreams for the future and create a broader impact with the explored opportunities, the political context of rural municipalities in the Netherlands also bears relevance. Urban political overrepresentation coincides with political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands (Chapter 5). This situation may hamper rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. It may explain why the lack of housing availability and career opportunities in such municipalities has not yet been tackled (Chapter 2). Urban political overrepresentation may also explain the limited financial support from the national

government for the cultural sector outside of the extremely urbanized municipalities (Chapter 3). The need for more attention to the vacant farm buildings issue and the slow progress in creating a spatial planning system that fits the ongoing rural transformation (Chapter 4) may also be related to urban political overrepresentation. A lack of understanding among national politicians on the needs of and opportunities for people who work and live in rural municipalities may make it harder to address these needs and create these opportunities. Therefore, the future of young adults in rural municipalities relies on two developments: 1) The ability of young adults in rural municipalities to use community resources to support rural development and regeneration and 2) the role of policymakers in supporting these efforts.

The main findings of this dissertation have implications for scholarly debates, policy and society. It may also be understood in the limitations of the research underpinning this dissertation. This understanding helps to specify an agenda for further research on the future of young adults in rural municipalities. The following section focuses on these topics.

## 6.2 Reflections on the research

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This section reflects on the main findings of this dissertation. It first focuses on the scholarly implications of the dissertation. This is done by discussing the contribution of this research within and beyond the research themes and theoretical debates introduced in Chapter 1. Next, this section addresses the research results' implications for policy and society, focusing on different stakeholders. Then, the limitations of this research are discussed. Finally, this section presents an agenda for further research on the future of young adults in rural regions.

### 6.2.1 Scholarly implications

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This subsection presents the scholarly implications of the main findings in this dissertation. The findings have implications within and beyond the theoretical debates introduced in Chapter 1. These will be discussed. The scholarly implications also help to suggest an agenda for further research on young adults in rural regions, which will be presented in section 6.2.3.

This dissertation addresses the research theme of rural demography and the debate on future migration patterns. The move of young adults towards urban municipalities (See Table 1.1; Eurostat 2023a) is usually explained with the assumption that young adults prefer to move towards urban regions (Kashnitsky et al., 2021; Eurostat, 2023b). The results in Chapter 2 show an alternative explanation. Rural municipalities are popular places of residence in the dreams for the future of young adults. This finding confirms the emerging trend that young adults increasingly want to stay in rural regions (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018), and it contrasts with research that suggests differently (Kashnitsky et al., 2021). The importance of the connection between residential and lifestyle dreams confirms recent findings about the importance of 'soft' factors in mobility decisions by young adults (Hofstede, 2023). This dissertation thus shows that rural municipalities are more popular among young adults in the Netherlands than expected. This suggests the value of an alternative approach towards the demographic potential of rural municipalities.

The obstacles that young adults foresee in realizing their rural residential dreams show that these can be hard to achieve. The lack of available housing is the most foreseen obstacle for young adults in the Netherlands. This confirms the argument of Mckee and colleagues (2017), who suggested that housing is an underestimated reason young adults leave rural regions. This topic might receive more academic attention. Most literature suggested a lack of career opportunities would be the most foreseen obstacle (Thissen et al., 2010; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017). Some respondents still foresee this as an obstacle to achieving their rural residential dream, albeit less important than a lack of available housing. Chapter 4 shows that young entrepreneurs with rural residential and career dreams can create career opportunities in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. It may thus be possible to address the need for more available housing and career opportunities.

In studying future migration patterns, this dissertation shows the relevance of a micro-level focus on dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles and stated life plans. As the stated life plans differ from the dreams for the future, young adults with a rural residential dream may eventually choose to reside in rural municipalities. Studies based on earlier or current migration trends (Coulter & Van Ham, 2013; Stockdale et al., 2013) could not show the apparent dream of residing more rural. This dissertation confirms the importance of micro-level research on dreams for the future, as introduced by Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016), and research on stated life plans, as introduced by Anderson and colleagues (2005). It adds the idea of incorporating foreseen obstacles and stated life plans in research on dreams for the future. This approach enables an analysis of what obstacles make it harder to realise dreams for the future and a consequent discussion of what policies may take away such obstacles.

The debate on exogenous versus endogenous rural development relates to the research themes of rural communities and governance and rural economic planning. The results in Chapter 3 support the community-led neo-endogenous development approach. The investigated cultural festivals successfully create rural regeneration because of their close connection to local communities and resources and their focus on creating local benefits. Nonetheless, some top-down support has been necessary to make these festivals thrive. The local and provincial governments have created a cultural infrastructure and valuable networks. The festivals show cooperation between stakeholders, a balance between the local needs and demands of rural newcomers and a genuine focus on enhancing spatial justice. As such, the results in Chapter 3 show the importance of neo-endogenous rural development, as defined by Gkartzios and Lowe (2019). Their definition also enables researchers to consider sustainability issues, which can be valuable in the upcoming decades.

The results in Chapter 4 support the exogenous/endogenous approach to rural development. The exogenous process of the increasing number of vacant farm buildings coincides with initiatives by local entrepreneurs to re-use them commercially. There is thus a combination of the bottom-up initiative through commercial re-use and top-down flexibility and support by local and regional governments. This strengthens the ability of the studied cases to contribute to rural development. The results in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 confirm Terluin's (2003) idea that the community-led neo-endogenous and the exogenous/endogenous approach to rural development are both effective. Therefore, this dissertation shows that two decades after her study on the effectiveness of different rural development approaches, the results of Terluin (2003) still hold ground. It may continuously be used when assessing rural development and regeneration practices.

Furthermore, the results in Chapter 3 extend knowledge of how rural festivals and rural regeneration may be understood in the exogenous/endogenous debate. Mahon and Hyyryläinen (2019) and Duxbury and colleagues (2020) have suggested that community-led festivals create more vital rural regeneration than private-led festivals. However, the results in Chapter 3 show that both private-led festivals and community-led festivals can have valuable local benefits. The local benefits from the studied private-led festival are related to its focus on connecting to Oldambt and its inhabitants. The festival also helps reinvent Oldambt, an essential element of rural regeneration (Pemberton, 2019). Thus, this dissertation adds that a local focus, embedded in a neo-endogenous approach to rural development and regeneration, can also be successful if it is not community-led but comes from entrepreneurs or governments. This widens the opportunities to create and study rural development and regeneration.

This dissertation relates to the rural economic planning research theme by engaging in the debate on productivism, post-productivism and neo-productivism. Chapter 4 shows the value of a cooperative neo-productivist approach to rural development, as Burton and Wilson (2012) explain. The studied cases of commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings show firm community embeddedness and alignment with local political interests. This has been achieved by using farm buildings that were relatively close to existing settlements and by creating new jobs. The cases also focus on the commercial interests of the owners of the vacant farm buildings and the business owners who settled there. However, there may also be a disturbance of the balance between local embeddedness and governmental and commercial interests. Increased shop vacancies or lower demand for office space within commercially re-used vacant farm buildings could hamper their commercial success. Moreover, the attractiveness of such buildings may also invoke shop and office vacancies elsewhere in rural municipalities. That would limit the contribution to rural development. Scale-up processes of businesses settled in commercially re-used vacant farm buildings could make such locations less aligned with governmental interests or face opposition from local communities. To avoid such problems, this dissertation's findings suggest that supporting continuous cooperation in neo-productivist approaches to rural economic planning is crucial. In periods of societal polarisation, cooperation is a critical element of rural development and regeneration.

The dissertation explicitly focuses on opportunities for young adults in neo-productivist approaches to rural development. The findings show that commercially re-used vacant farm buildings are an attractive location for young entrepreneurs to settle their business in a rural municipality. Meanwhile, jobs are created for young adults from the municipality and elsewhere. These findings stress that rural municipalities are places of both consumption and production (Šimon, 2014). This dissertation argues that the neo-productivist approach to rural economic planning helps create career opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities. This knowledge may be helpful in upcoming discussions on the economic role of the countryside.

Within the field of rural political geography, this research engages with the debate on spatial justice for rural regions. Chapter 5 shows the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands and how these municipalities have political benefits that do not apply to other municipalities. These results confirm earlier research suggesting that political overrepresentation of some geographical locations has a positive budgetary impact on these places (Fiva & Halse, 2016). This dissertation extends this argument by analysing not just the politicians' places of residence but a set of municipalities with comparable degrees of urbanization that may profit from political overrepresentation. Furthermore, it incorporates research on the budgetary consequences of political overrepresentation into the literature

on the geography of discontent and spatial justice in the countryside. The findings in Chapter 5 confirm the arguments of Guilluy (2016) that national politicians in the Global North lack an understanding of the concerns in rural municipalities. This urban-rural cleavage can be understood to exist next to the centre-periphery cleavage, for which recent research found comparable results (Van Vulpen, 2023). This may help explain rural political discontent. It also confirms the importance of a continued scholarly focus on rural spatial justice (Nordberg, 2020).

The findings of this dissertation thus address a series of theoretical debates related to research themes on the future of young adults in rural regions and have implications within and beyond these debates. The findings of the dissertation also have implications for policies and society. The following subsection will focus on these.

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## 6.2.2 Implications for policy and society

The main findings of this research have implications for the role of policymakers and society in creating rural development and regeneration. These findings are also related to the policy suggestions that resulted from the European-scale research project that underpins this dissertation (Ruralization, 2023; Martin-Prével et al., 2023). The findings of this dissertation support cooperative neo-productivist, exogenous/endogenous and community-led neo-endogenous approaches to rural development and regeneration. These approaches come with normative ideas for the role of policymakers, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], citizens and communities (Burton & Wilson, 2012; Terluin, 2003; Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). The following subsection presents how individuals and organisations who seek to enhance opportunities for young adults could use these normative ideas to achieve rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

Policymakers on all levels of government may critically reflect on their role in rural municipalities. Without considering bottom-up initiatives, exogenous top-down policies are unlikely to help young adults create rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities. Likewise, bottom-up initiatives without top-down support are unlikely to create enough impact to help rural municipalities out of their unfavourable political situation. Policymakers may focus more on supporting existing bottom-up initiatives and enable entrepreneurs, NGOs, citizens and communities to create rural development and regeneration. This does not mean governments can point to a lack of local initiative as an explanation for a lack of rural development. Bottom-

up initiatives require governmental support and it is important to also structurally improve the situation of rural municipalities and their inhabitants. This requires an active involvement of policymakers on all levels.

On the European level, The CAP may focus more on rural development and regeneration. These elements became increasingly important under the CAP structure (Bosworth et al., 2016). Recently, there have been reductions in rural development budgets (Rac et al., 2020). Such reductions put progress in rural development and regeneration processes at risk. However, such progress is critical to the success of rural municipalities during the ongoing agricultural transformations (Eurostat, 2023c). It would be better if policymakers at the European level listen to local demands and focus on enhancing local capital and the connectivity of rural municipalities.

On the national level, policymakers may focus on improving rural municipalities' structural situation while enabling rural communities within such municipalities to thrive. First and foremost, this requires listening to the needs of rural municipalities and their inhabitants. Chapter 2 describes foreseen obstacles to realising rural residential dreams for the future. The respondents mention, first and foremost, a lack of available housing and, second, a lack of career opportunities. Regarding housing availability, this suggests a more careful approach in policies that focus on the densification of settlements (Broitman & Koomen, 2020). Densification makes it harder to realise dreams for the future to reside outside of settlements. National politicians may consider this when making policies to provide more housing in the Netherlands. The national government may also spread career opportunities in the public sector more evenly across the Netherlands. Chapter 2 shows that such jobs can be hard to find in rural municipalities and their vicinity. An approach that seeks spatial justice in rural regions moves public sector jobs from the central Randstad region towards more peripheral regions. Such a spatial justice approach may also reorganise the national funding for the cultural sector and spread this more evenly, significantly increasing funding for cultural institutions and events in rural municipalities. In rural economic planning, national policymakers might develop more awareness that the foreseen diminished size of the agricultural sector requires new economic perspectives for the rural municipalities where this process will have harsh economic effects. Regarding opportunities to re-use vacant farm buildings, the national government may make sure that its laws are not preventing developments that directly contribute to rural development and regeneration. This may require rethinking the current spatial planning system.

National politicians bear responsibility for the unfavourable context in which rural municipalities and their inhabitants operate, as Chapter 5 stresses. Region deals help improve this context, but their budgets and periods need to be expanded to create structural improvements. Furthermore, the continuous bidding for money to access necessary funding shows the power imbalance between the national government and rural municipalities. This could be altered. Repositioning the responsibilities for rural policies between levels of government and ending the continuous amalgamation of rural municipalities may increase the political trust among rural citizens. Political parties might rethink their candidate lists and consider if they contribute to urban political overrepresentation. Ideally, they may seek to change the electoral system and ensure more equal representation. Once elected, national politicians may support underrepresented rural municipalities and their inhabitants and address their concerns.

At the regional and local level, it is important to listen to concerns raised by inhabitants of rural municipalities and adopt these into policies. Decentralisation has increased the responsibilities of both provinces and municipalities in the Netherlands (Groenleer & Hendriks; Hoekman et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the ongoing amalgamation of municipalities may give the feeling to rural citizens that the local government is further away from them (Terlouw, 2016). In large municipalities, it is essential that policymakers act beyond the interest of the main settlement and also focus on more rural areas within their municipality. Regarding the dreams for the future of young adults, provinces and municipalities may cooperate to increase housing availability inside and around rural villages. Besides cooperation with other governments, it is important for governments to cooperate with citizens, entrepreneurs, NGOs and communities. For example, the regeneration of rural municipalities through cultural festivals depends on local initiatives, but financial and organisational support may lead to more substantial successes. Provinces and rural municipalities may also adopt a more positive approach towards commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. This would help maintain or attract young adults to the countryside and support rural development and regeneration. Finally, rural municipalities' structurally unfavourable political position in the Netherlands requires them to seek opportunities to make themselves more heard and relevant nationally.

The importance of a pro-active approach also applies to citizens, entrepreneurs, NGOs and communities in rural municipalities. Cooperative neo-productivist, exogenous/ endogenous, and community-led neo-endogenous rural development and regeneration all require bottom-up initiative. Chapter 3 shows how rural communities can help to reinvent a rural municipality. Their bottom-up initiatives were a prerequisite for the success of the cultural festivals, further developed by top-down support from governments on multiple levels. Chapter 4 shows that local entrepreneurs and

community support are critical success factors for the commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. Chapter 5 shows the challenging political context in which rural municipalities and their inhabitants operate. Without efforts from local citizens, entrepreneurs, NGOs and communities, the economic importance of rural municipalities and their inhabitants will decrease further (Koster et al., 2020). Chapter 2 shows policy obstacles to realising dreams for the future of young adults. If they want these to be tackled, young adults need to create awareness among policymakers on all governmental levels. This will help them increase and use opportunities that support rural development and regeneration in rural municipalities in the Netherlands.

When addressing this dissertation's implications for scholarly debates, policy and society, there are also some limitations of the research that underpins the dissertation. This has implications for the future research agenda. The following sub-section discusses these.

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### 6.2.3 Limitations and future research agenda

This dissertation seeks to achieve its primary aim by incorporating different research themes and addressing relevant debates for the future of young adults in rural regions. However, there are also some limitations to the research results. These are set out in this sub-section, together with an agenda for future research.

Given the qualitative methods underpinning this dissertation, it cannot make quantitative claims. The findings must be understood in the context of the qualitative cases and research participants. This requires carefulness when generalising the findings and a critical awareness of the sample of research participants. In Chapter 2, the sample of survey respondents and focus group participants is unrepresentative. Research participants may have been biased towards young adults interested in a future in a rural municipality in the Netherlands. The interviewees in Chapters 3 and 4 are relatively often involved in the investigated cases and may have had a bias in favour of the studied practices. The Oldambt municipality in Chapter 3 has experienced depopulation and a relatively vital regeneration process, making it an outlier compared to other rural municipalities in the Netherlands. The Raalte and Boekel municipalities, with relatively flexible land use policies, are part of the critical case study in Chapter 4. They represent municipalities with a relatively favourable context for commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings. Chapter 5 shows more quantitative analysis than other chapters, especially regarding political urban overrepresentation. However, its claims on access to funding for municipalities outside of the region deals have yet to be tested quantitatively.

This dissertation's qualitative findings relate to the research participants' daily practices and allow an in-depth study of their dreams for the future, their contribution to rural development and regeneration and the unequal access to funding for municipalities with different degrees of urbanization. The dissertation argues, among other things, for a community-led neo-endogenous approach to rural development and regeneration. This entails understanding rural processes within their local context, as it recognises that rural municipalities have different forms of capital, histories, and opportunities (Bosworth et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, future research on opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands may take a more quantitative approach. Such research would evaluate the qualitative findings in this dissertation. It may test the popularity of rural municipalities in the dreams for the future of young adults in the Netherlands, as discussed in Chapter 2. Quantitative analyses of the contributions of cultural festivals and commercial re-use of vacant farm buildings to rural development and regeneration, as qualitatively analysed in Chapters 3 and 4, would substantiate the knowledge on these topics. Quantitative research on how funding from the Dutch municipal fund is directed towards municipalities in different categories of urbanization would test the theory on urban political overrepresentation and consequent political benefits, as discussed in Chapter 5.

The geographical scope is another limitation of the research in this dissertation. It studies rural municipalities in the Netherlands. Therefore, some findings may not apply to rural municipalities elsewhere. There are some specific situations in the Netherlands, such as the lack of available housing for young adults throughout the country and the relative closeness of rural municipalities to urban municipalities. In other countries, with different contexts, and with more remotely rural regions, the research methods in this dissertation could have led to other results.

However, the geographical focus does not necessarily mean that the results are useless in rural municipalities outside the Netherlands. Intermediate regions and the one predominantly rural region in the Netherlands are relatively close to cities. This means that more than half of the inhabitants can drive to a city with more than 50,000 inhabitants within 45 minutes. Within the European Union, more people live in these predominantly rural regions close to a city than in remote rural regions (Eurostat, 2023d). This suggests that the results in the Netherlands also have value in other European countries. The research outcomes in the Ruralization research project point to similar patterns as in the Netherlands. A lack of career opportunities and available housing are also the most cited obstacles to realizing the rural residential dream of the future for young adults in Ireland, Poland, and France (Murtagh et al., 2023; Kuhmonen et al., 2021). There has also been

Ruralization research on opportunities for young adults to create rural development and regeneration in other European countries. The outcomes also point to the importance of bottom-up initiatives with local embeddedness and top-down governmental support (Janc et al., 2023; Conti & Sivini, 2023).

A further limitation of this dissertation's results is that the research for this dissertation has been conducted in various rural municipalities. That means the findings per chapter do not necessarily hold in municipalities investigated in other chapters. On the other hand, the approach to include various rural municipalities in the Netherlands enables the selection of more relevant cases and research in different types of rural municipalities.

Further research in other geographical locations would add to the research in this dissertation. In an international context, it may be interesting to see the extent to which the findings of this dissertation depend on the Dutch context. The Ruralization research project already helps to contextualise these findings. However, comparative research between rural municipalities in the Netherlands and other countries may deepen the understanding of opportunities for young adults to create rural development and regeneration. Within the context of the Netherlands, more longitudinal research in one rural municipality or region may be helpful. Multiple case studies within a similar geographical area may help create an interdisciplinary understanding of the future of young adults in this rural area by enabling lessons and knowledge creation across different research themes.

The research for this dissertation has been conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, there were limited opportunities to connect with other researchers and conduct research physically. Respondents may also have given different answers due to the societal turmoil. Where possible, they have been asked how the pandemic impacted their answers. Chapter 2 shows that most survey respondents do not think the COVID-19 pandemic impacts their dreams for the future. Nonetheless, longitudinal or repeated research may reveal the impact of COVID-19 on the results of this dissertation.

The academic debates on the topic of this dissertation are evolving quickly. While the published chapters of this dissertation were under review by academic journals, relevant and directly related articles may have been published. In this regard, at least the work of Hofstede (2023), Van Vulpen (2023), and Maersk (2022) should be mentioned. Future researchers may make use of their findings and relate them to the findings in this dissertation.

In future research, some elements of this dissertation's debates and research themes require more attention. Within the rural demography theme, further development of the micro-level approach of dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles and the latter's influence on stated life plans would be interesting. Knowledge about this enables an analysis of what obstacles may be tackled by other policies. Consequently, it may be investigated if such policies alter the stated life plans of young adults. The lack of available housing is one obstacle that warrants further research. Studies may also focus on young adults with an urban residential dream for the future and a more rural stated life plan.

In assessing rural communities and governance, it would be interesting to compare rural communities and examine what factors impact the opportunities to create rural development and regeneration. The rural economic planning research theme asks for more attention to the re-use of vacant farm buildings for residential purposes. This relates to the lack of available housing as the most foreseen obstacle to realising rural residential dreams by young adults.

Concerning rural political geography, there may be more analysis of the connection between political overrepresentation, political benefits, and political discontent. This may focus on the differences between rural-urban and centre-periphery cleavages. Sustainable development requires more attention throughout the research on rural development and regeneration opportunities for young adults. The significant impact of climate change on rural municipalities justifies continuous attention to this research theme.

## 6.3 Final statement

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I have written this dissertation to contribute to knowledge on future opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities. I have shown that there is more interest in residing in rural municipalities than what is generally conceived by scholars and policymakers. I have also studied promising rural development and regeneration practices in rural municipalities in the Netherlands that have made them more attractive to young adults. However, I have also shown the challenging political context in which rural municipalities and their inhabitants operate. To unleash the potential for young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands, everyone involved needs to be committed to this goal. In the upcoming years, a cooperative

attitude among stakeholders could enable the realisation of the dreams for the future of young adults. Meanwhile, more research can critically assess the findings of this dissertation. Given the challenging demographic, economic and political context for rural municipalities in the Netherlands, rural development and regeneration require long-term commitments. I hope young adults, policymakers, scholars and other people involved will make this commitment and help create a spatially just society where people who dream of residing and working in rural municipalities can realise their dream.

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# Appendices

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# Survey dreams for the future

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## Survey dreams for the future (Chapter 2, translated from Dutch to English)

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- 1 Background information
- 2 Country
- 3 Place of residence
- 4 Place of birth
- 5 Age
  
- 6 Sex
  - a Female
  - b Male
  - c Other
  
- 7 Employment status
  - a Student
  - b Employed
  - c Unemployed
  - d Out of labour force and not looking for work
  
- 8 If employed...
  - a Salaried worker
  - b Entrepreneur
  - c Salaried worker and entrepreneur
  
- 9 If entrepreneur...
  - a Farm entrepreneur
  - b Other entrepreneur

- 10 Family status
  - a Single
  - b Have a partner
  
- 11 Children
  - a Yes
  - b No
  
- 12 Housing arrangements
  - a Living alone (and possibly with child/children)
  - b Living with my partner (and possibly with child/children)
  - c Living with my friends, relatives or other people (and possibly child/children)
  
- 13 Highest finished education
  - a Primary - Basis
  - b Secondary - (V)MBO, HAVO, VWO
  - c Tertiary – HBO or University
  
- 14 Choose your area type



*Remote rural area*

*Rural village or a small town*

*Rural area close to a city (commuting distance)*

*Suburb in a city area*

*City area outside the centre*

*City centre*

- a At birth
- b Currently
- c In your dream for the future

## Describe your personal dream future in about 15 years (year 2035)

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- 15 **Livelihood recipe: How do you earn your living?** Please describe with a few sentences the most important aspects: what would be your profession, business sector, earning level, etc. and what would be most important issues in your work?
- 16 Would you be...
  - a Salaried worker
  - b Entrepreneur
  - c Salaried worker and entrepreneur
- 17 If entrepreneur...
  - a Farm entrepreneur
  - b Other entrepreneur
- 18 **Accommodation recipe: Where do you live? In what kind of a place, neighbourhood and house?** Please describe with a few sentences the most important aspects: the location, physical and social milieu, access to services, neighbourhood, house, etc. and what would be important issues in your accommodation dreams?
- 19 **Lifestyle recipe: How do you live? What is your lifestyle?** Please describe with a few sentences the most important aspects: your hobbies, personal development and lifestyle, role of other people, facilities needed, etc. and what would be the most important issues in your lifestyle?
- 20 **Obstacles: What are the most important obstacles in realising your dream?** Please describe with a few sentences the most important aspects: what are the issues that prevent or complicate you from realising your dream within the next 15 years?

21 How significant obstacles are the following issues for realising your personal dream?  
Please choose one option on the scale for each item

- a Lack of capital
  - Not at all important
  - Of litte importance
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Very important
- b Lack of infrastructure in the dream area
  - Not at all important
  - Of litte importance
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Very important
- c Lack of local services in the dream area
  - Not at all important
  - Of litte importance
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Very important
- d Lack of open jobs in the dream area
  - Not at all important
  - Of litte importance
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Very important
- e Lack of own competence
  - Not at all important
  - Of litte importance
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Very important
- f Lack of social and professional networks
  - Not at all important
  - Of litte importance
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Very important

- 22 How do you think that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted your answers in this survey?
- a No impact
  - b A little impact
  - c Some impact
  - d Much impact
  - e Very much impact

This survey was mainly based on the proposed survey by the Ruralization consortium (Kuhmonen, 2019), as published as a deliverable in the Ruralization project.

Kuhmonen, T. (2019). *T3.4 Formulation of detailed research and innovation guidelines for WP4*.

# Topic list for Focus groups

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## Topic list for focus groups (Chapter 2, translated from Dutch to English)

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- 1 Bonding
  - a The majority wants to live in their current place of residence in 15 years (Screen)
  - b What explains the strong bond with your current place of residence?
  
- 2 Living
  - a Many young people want to live in the countryside in 15 years (Screen)
  - b What exactly is the intention? Who wants this too? What does this look like?
  
- 3 Career
  - a A striking number of young people want to become entrepreneurs (Screen)
  - b Why do you think this is the case?
  
- 4 Obstacle I: Housing
  - a The lack of suitable housing is a major obstacle in achieving future dreams for young people
  - b What exactly is the problem?
  - c What experiences do you have with this yourself or do you see it in your environment?
  - d What needs to be done to solve the housing problem (and who should do it)?
  
- 5 Obstacle II: Career?
  - a A lack of available jobs has also been mentioned as an obstacle.
  - b What exactly is the problem?
  - c What experiences have you had with this yourself or have you seen it in the area?
  - d What should be done about this (and who should do it)?

- 6 Living and working dilemmas
  - a It is interesting to know what has the most priority for young people.
  - b Would you rather buy or rent?
  - c If that is not possible, would you live elsewhere or stay nearby?
  - d Would you rather live in your ideal place of residence and have a less ideal job or would you rather live somewhere else and have an ideal job?
  
- 7 Free time
  - a All kinds of ideal leisure activities have been mentioned.
  - b What are the options for spending your free time in your area?
  - c What can be done better?
  
- 8 Life plans
  - a What will you do if the obstacles you foresee do not disappear?
  - b How would this affect your life plan?
  - c Where are you going to live/work?
  - d And what would that mean to you personally?
  
- 9 Own role
  - a Even though many obstacles mentioned require something from others, some respondents say that they can remove obstacles themselves.
  - b What could you do to reduce the problems discussed today?
  
- 10 Undiscussed Topics:
  - a Are there important topics that we have not yet discussed? If yes, which one?

# Interview guide

# Cultural festivals

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## Interview guide Cultural festivals (Chapter 3, translated from Dutch to English)

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- 11 Background area
  - a Origins of the cultural festival(s)
  - b Local context in Oldambt
  - c Involved actors in the area (public, private and societal)
  - d Obstacles that the idea and/or area deals with
  - e Main benefits of the festivals
  
- 12 Description of current developments
  - a What are important developments in Oldambt
  - b Role of festivals in these developments
  - c Connection of festivals to local communities and resources
  - d Innovative elements within the festivals
  - e Role of festivals in employment Oldambt
  - f Role of festivals concerning young people in Oldambt
  - g Administrative relationship in the local context
    - Government(s)
    - Residents (local support)
    - Entrepreneurs
  - h Advantages and disadvantages of current approach
  
- 13 Impact of the events and future
  - a Specific impact of cultural events on
    - The attractiveness of Oldambt (for young people)
    - Economy Oldambt
    - Social cohesion (liveability) within Oldambt
    - Connectedness of Oldambt to other regions

- 14 Future perspective
  - a Expected developments
  - b Transferability to other contexts

This interview guide was mainly based on the proposed interview guide by the Ruralization consortium (Sivini et al., 2019), as published as a deliverable in the Ruralization project.

Sivini, S., Vitale, A., Kovach, I., Bahner, T. (2019). *T3.5 Formulation of detailed research and innovation guidelines for WP5.*

# Interview guide

## Vacant farm buildings

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### Interview guide Vacant farm buildings (Chapter 4, translated from Dutch to English)

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- 1 Origins
  - a Origin of idea
  - b Relevant stakeholders
  - c Motivations/goals
  - d Description of local context
  - e Main obstacles and conflicts in the initial process
  - f Main benefits of the idea
  
- 2 Description of the practice of commercially re-using vacant farm buildings
  - a Description of the activities carried out
  - b Innovative aspects
  - c Environmental aspects
  - d Employment (quantity)
  - e Economic aspect (how successful)
  - f Conflicts/challenges
    - Internal conflicts
    - External conflicts (also with opponents/local community)
  - g Local networks (components)
  - h Relation to local context (compared to idea origin)
    - Advantages
    - Disadvantages
  - i Relations with government(s)
    - Overall relations with government(s)
    - Relations with government(s) in terms of political content
    - Bureaucratic and procedural relation with government(s)

- 3 Impact of practice and perspectives
  - a Social, environmental and economic impact
    - Economic effects at local level
    - Environmental effects (landscape quality) at local level
    - Effects on social cohesion (liveability)
    - Effects at the political level
    - Effects on female roles
  - b Impact on young people
  - c Future perspectives
    - New, similar initiatives
    - Transferability to other contexts

This interview guide was mainly based on the proposed interview guide by the Ruralization consortium (Sivini et al., 2019), as published as a deliverable in the Ruralization project.

Sivini, S., Vitale, A., Kovach, I., Bahner, T. (2019). *T3.5 Formulation of detailed research and innovation guidelines for WP5.*

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When I applied for this job as a PhD Candidate, I had never visited TU Delft before. I remember that I entered the faculty building and saw the huge Model Hall. As a social scientist, I was deeply impressed by all the designs. During the interview, I kept repeating that I was not an engineer. I just could not figure out how someone with my academic background could work at that faculty. Luckily, my promotors explained to me that there was no reason to worry and that I could do it. This was the first of many times that they would do that...

My promotor Willem and co-promotor Marjolein have been very valuable throughout my PhD journey. Thank you both for giving me so much freedom in developing my thoughts and research, while always staying critical. Whenever I wanted to meet you, together or individually, you found time for me. Whenever I asked you to read my work, I received detailed and valuable feedback. Whenever I felt insecure about what next step to take, your advice helped me to get back on track. I particularly enjoyed the humour that was always part of our meetings. I will have to get used to not making jokes about going to rural areas on electric scooters. Willem, thank you for involving me so much in the Ruralization project, teaching me more about planning, and giving me opportunities that I would otherwise not have had. Marjolein, thank you for always putting my interests on top of your mind, giving me detailed feedback, and being such a warm and welcoming individual. As I told you before, it was a blessing to have both of you as supervisors. I could simply not have done it without you.

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Next to the academic staff, our faculty is blessed with a great supportive staff. Without them, my work would have been very difficult, if not impossible. I particularly

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From now onwards, I will continue this acknowledgement chapter in Dutch.

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# Curriculum Vitae

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**Maarten Koreman** was born on 13 April 1994 in Breda, The Netherlands. He followed high school education at Stedelijk Gymnasium Breda between 2006 and 2012. He received two BSc. degrees at Utrecht University in 2017: Public Administration & Organisational Science; and Human Geography & Planning. He then continued with the European Master of Global Studies, a two-year double degree master programme on the causes and effects of globalization from an economic, historical and sociological perspective. Maarten followed his first year in Germany, resulting in an MA from Leipzig University, and his second year in the United Kingdom, resulting in a MSc. in Global Economic History from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2019.

Since 2019, Maarten has conducted PhD research at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of TU Delft. His PhD focused on the future of young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands. This topic relates to multiple research themes, such as demography, community development, planning, and political geography. The research was supervised by Professor Willem Korthals Altes and Dr. Marjolein Spaans.

Given the societal relevance of his PhD research, Maarten actively communicated his research findings. He presented his research to stakeholders, wrote opinion articles in several national and regional media, and contributed to ideas formation for multiple political parties. This also served his long-term interest in politics, debating and campaigning. On the European level, Maarten was a member of the EU CAP Thematic Group on Rural Youth Employment in 2023. On the national level, Maarten has been a board member of the Dutch Association for Small Villages (Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen). He will continue to work as an employee of this organisation after finishing his PhD, as he is committed to supporting further rural development and regeneration opportunities for young adults in rural municipalities in the Netherlands.



# List of publications

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## Peer-reviewed journal articles

### Published

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24#07

## Rural futures for young adults

Rural development and regeneration in the Netherlands

**Maarten Koreman**

Young adults are essential in the future of rural municipalities. They can revive places in decline and create new opportunities. But what future dreams, plans and opportunities do they have? Embark on a journey through the Dutch countryside to uncover the future dreams of young adults. Delve into the dreams, plans, and obstacles shaping the future of rural municipalities. Through the vibrant tapestry of cultural festivals, witness the revitalization of once-declining communities. Additionally, examine the innovative re-use of vacant farm buildings, offering promising opportunities for regeneration, economic growth and entrepreneurship.

However, amidst these prospects lies a challenge: the political landscape, where urban interests often overshadow rural needs. Shedding light on these dynamics and navigating its complexities, this research aims to empower rural communities. It suggests how to pave the way towards better policies for rural municipalities in the Netherlands. Where young adults can build their rural futures.

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