

# SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE – SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Barbara Černič-Maly<sup>1</sup>, Andreas Koch<sup>2</sup>, Madeleine Koch<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract:** This introduction into the special issue of European Countryside describes the need to move from knowledge to action and from simplification to complexification in contemporary discourses about demographic change. While the first movement arguably refers to the contributions of this issue the latter is a plea towards more specification and differentiation when investigating and assessing phenomena of demographic change.

**Keywords:** local knowledge, demographic complexity, regional disparities

**Zusammenfassung:** Diese einführenden Bemerkungen in die Sonderausgabe von European Countryside beschreiben die Ansicht, vom Wissen zum Tun und von der Vereinfachung zur Komplexität in aktuellen Debatten über den demographischen Wandel überzugehen. Während im ersten Fall die Beiträge beredete Zeugnisse hierüber abgeben, sollen für den zweiten Fall Hinweise für eine stärker spezifizierende und differenzierende Auseinandersetzung bei der Untersuchung und Bewertung von Phänomenen des demographischen Wandels geliefert werden.

**Schlüsselwörter:** lokales Wissen, demographische Komplexität, regionale Disparitäten

## 1. Introduction

Reflecting upon demographic changes, their causes and effects, their societal implications and challenges has meanwhile led to a different view which can be circumscribed as (1) from knowledge to action, and (2) from simplification to complexification. There is a huge amount of data available, and analysis and interpretation of information as well as assessment of political strategies coping with structural, functional, spatial, and temporal domains of ageing, migration, and life expectancy have been performed and published extensively. The contributions of this special issue of European Countryside take this knowledge base into account, but put

<sup>1</sup> Univ.dipl.ekon. Barbara Černič Maly, Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia Ljubljana, Trnovski Pristan 2, Slovenia; e-mail: barbara.cernic@uirsi.si

<sup>2</sup> Univ.-Prof. Dr. Andreas Koch, Department of Geography and Geology, University of Salzburg, Hellbrunnerstrasse 34, 5020 Salzburg, Austria; e-mail: andreas.koch@sbg.ac.at

<sup>3</sup> MSc. Madeleine Koch, Department of Geography and Geology, University of Salzburg, Hellbrunnerstrasse 34, 5020 Salzburg, Austria; e-mail: madeleine.koch.ac.at

the emphasis more pronounced to the application side, i.e. acting with and on the knowledge about demographic changes.

The shift from simplicity to complexity shall express that demographic change is a diverse and heterogeneous composition of creeping and subtle processes, mutually influencing each other in different ways, at different scales, and in different regions, thus different people. Complexifying the discourses on demographic change not only means to reduce the diverse and different processes taken (and taking) place in different regions with different dynamics and different social implications differently to general trends, but also to avoid ideological and decontextualized programmatic proposals. Tailored approaches – not understood as being objectively suitable in dealing with specific demographic issues – cannot be achieved without a comprehensive account on relationships and the idiosyncratic amalgam of social-local patterns emerged through demographic transformations.

This meta-level of discourse seems to be evident in order to more or less successfully apply knowledge to concrete projects, ideas and recommendations which are being presented in this volume. The subsequent comments are dedicated to frame the introduced applications and ideas which have been presented during the final conference on *DEMOCHANGE – Demographic Change in the Alps*, held in Kranjska Gora in September 2012. We begin with the organisational frame, the *DEMOCHANGE* project itself, followed by some remarks on “societal implications” and “societal challenges” which hint to the complexities of demographic changes.

## **2. DEMOCHANGE – Demographic Change in the Alps. An EU project**

The project *DEMOCHANGE* was co-funded by the Alpine Space Programme, the EU transnational co-operation programme for the Alps ([www.demochange.org](http://www.demochange.org)). Assigned under the programme priority “Competitiveness and Attractiveness”, *DEMOCHANGE* is the first and thus far only project addressing effects and opportunities resulting from demographic change processes. Planners, regional developers, decision-makers from local and regional institutions as well as students from the fields of planning, economics and geography were brought into a discussion about possible solutions to cope with effects of demographic changes on various spatial levels.

The project, in addition, raised awareness among the general public, politicians and regional stakeholders for the importance of taking demographic change in the Alpine space as a major challenge for future developments in spatial planning and regional development.

Within the transnational project frame, thirteen project partners from five Alpine countries were actively involved to elaborate guidance for ten representative model regions:

- Austria: Regional Government of Salzburg, Department of Spatial Planning | University of Salzburg, Department of Geography and Geology
- Germany: Munich University of Applied Sciences, Department of Tourism | District Oberallgäu | District Garmisch-Partenkirchen
- Italy: Aosta Valley Autonomous Region, Economic and social observatory | UNCEM – Piemonte Delegation, National Union of Mountain Municipalities, Communities and Authorities, | Free University of Bolzano, School of Economics and Management
- Slovenia: UPIRS Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia | RAGOR Regional Development Agency for Upper Gorenjska
- Switzerland: Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, School of Social Work | Interface Institute of Political Studies | Conference of the Cantons Luzern, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Zug and Nidwalden

The project aimed at clarifying the understanding about impacts of demographic changes in different areas across the Alps. Ten model regions were selected for a detailed analysis (see Fig. 1). To provide a variety of adaptation strategies, the chosen regions varied in area size, number of inhabitants, relative location to metropolitan areas, economic structure and different spatial planning and regional development systems. Strategies to overcome potential and

already existing problems arising from an ageing society, a population decline and a shrinking working population had to be developed and implemented as pilot actions.

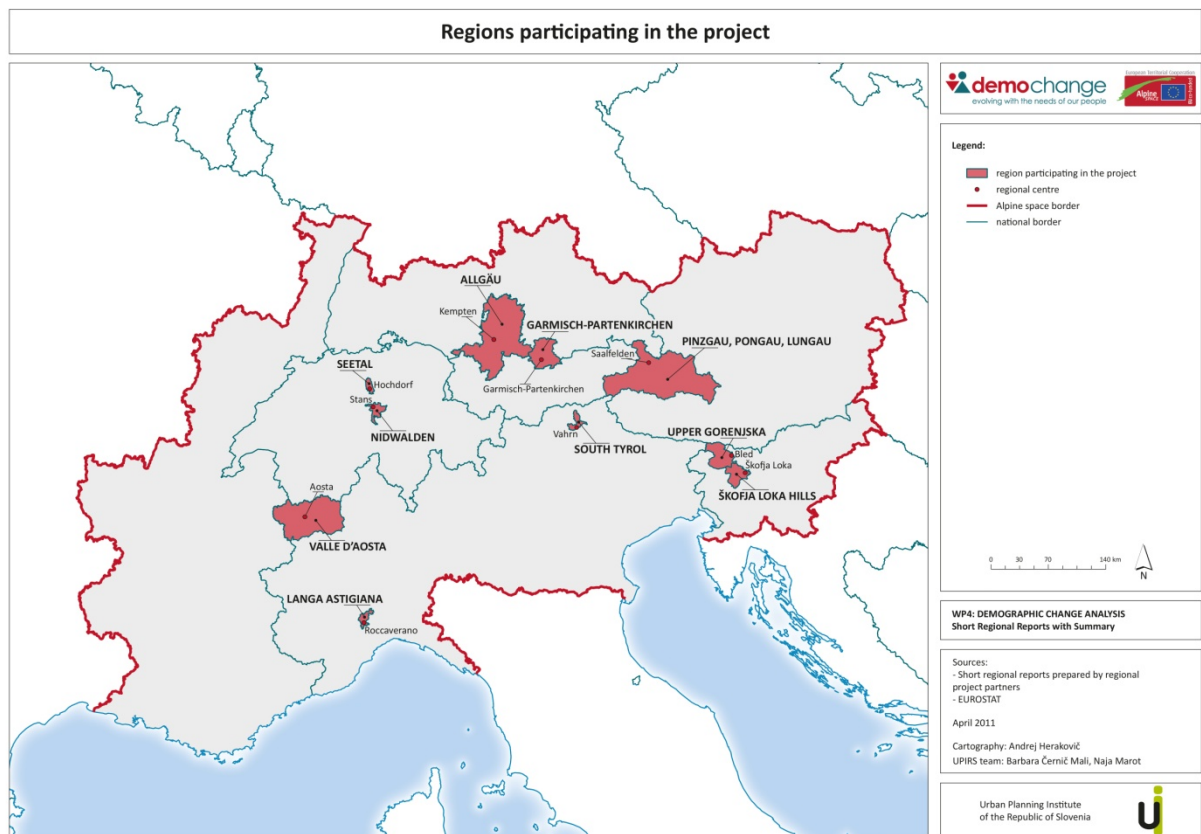


Fig 1. The DEMOCHANGE model regions (Source: Bausch 2012).

DEMOCHANGE started with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the demographic situation to gain deeper insights of the model regions. The analysis resulted in ten *Short Regional Reports* (Čermit and Marot, 2011) and a *Summary Report* on demographic change in the Alps. With this data collection a typology of demographic regional types in the Alpine space was developed as an important basis for the development of adaptation strategies. In order to support the strategy searching process an *online SWOT tool* has been developed to facilitate communication processes on local and regional level including various stakeholders and working groups ([www.swottool.de](http://www.swottool.de)). A participatory approach was chosen as a general methodology across the entire DEMOCHANGE project. To achieve this, a *Public Participation Manual* (Müller et al., 2011), providing a theoretical background and practical tools for the implementation of participatory processes in the model regions, has been prepared and disseminated. To demonstrate how the support of regions in their adaptation processes to demographic change within the existing spatial planning and regional development fabric could look like, various practical examples containing divergent approaches were put into practice. Nearly 30 *pilot actions* were designed and implemented by project and affiliated partners, covering a range of topics such as social infrastructure and society; tourism and hospitality; settlements and housing; mobility and infrastructure; health and housing care; job market and qualification. Some of the pilot actions were presented and discussed, along with other project results at the DEMOCHANGE final conference.

The *Final Strategic Paper*, addressed to policy makers, spatial planners and regional developers is expected to support them with guidance on implementing and evaluating demography-related targets. Apart from the project's overall results, it presents selected strategies which have been previously discussed within the DEMOCHANGE model regions. In addition, it is complemented with good practice examples from other regions which also cope with demographic challenges. Furthermore, the project aimed at an on-going communication process between involved stakeholders at all spatial scales. When debating future

developments in spatial planning and regional development demographically, it should be done as a mutual dialogue between all involved Alpine regions. Therefore, a sustaining, long lasting *DEMOCHANGE Expert Network* has been initiated, bringing together individuals and organizations during workshops and conferences, to discuss possible and applicable adaption strategies in specific fields and on different topics. This network is expected to foster an on-going transfer of knowledge about how to adapt to future demographic challenges beyond *DEMOCHANGE*.

Results of the project are summarised in the *DEMOCHANGE Result Booklet* (Forster et al, 2012). For detailed information on the projects content see also the *Final Strategic Paper* (Bausch et al. 2013) or have a look at the projects webpage: [www.demochange.org](http://www.demochange.org).

### 3. Societal Implications of Demographic Alterations

When reasoning about demographic alterations we have measures like fertility rate, life expectancy, and migration flows in mind. These measures are usually referred to a specific spatial and temporal unit. They thus indicate a (demographic) fact which in turn points to social, economic, political, and cultural effects. And these effected domains will likely affect demographic transformations. This interrelatedness not only confirms the idea of complexity, it also stresses the normative character of the discourses. Indicators are not naturally given in an objective sense, nor are they self-evident; they are socially (re-)produced and being used and perceived selectively. Despite – or better, because of – the normative nature of indicators we are able to extend the scopes of freedom when assessing problems of demographic change. Furthermore, by introducing modifiable units of the social, the spatial, and the temporal (Koch and Carson 2012), we simultaneously increase the domains of complexity. Though it likely hampers decision making, it inevitably fosters the discourse about the legal and political rights of the “equality of living conditions” which is implemented in many national planning laws.

The requirement for equality is closely related to the equality of opportunities and the free development of the individual (Kaltenbrunner, 2006: 393). Individual claims and needs must therefore be negotiated and balanced with collective claims and needs – at different scales. According to Strubelt (2006: 307; translation A.K.): “Thus, equality as a more or less abstract aim has become an ever more difficult political and epistemological construct – independently of the problem of measuring disparities in specific social domains. Attempts to achieve this with different indicators and to adopt them for rankings [...], may be of great public and media interest, but are highly problematic from a methodological perspective. They often reduce complexity significantly”.

One effort of the *DEMOCHANGE* project was to figure out local-regional disparities within and between their respective model regions. Comparative analyses logically revealed a disparate distribution of social, provisional, and transportation infrastructures. They represent a contemporary image of demographic and settlement structures, community needs and economic conditions of supply. This, however, is just one half of the truth. The other half is about the complex patterns of demanding services in a spatial and community context. A series of questionnaires and expert interviews which have been conducted in most model regions revealed among others that demand of infrastructures and services cannot solely be reduced to plausible variables like ‘age’, ‘gender’, or ‘income’. It crucially depends also on the biographical and household situation, on the functional and spatial network of housing, working, and places of education or provision.

For instance, a 25 year old mother may rely on a local allocation of services, because she works close to her home, her children visit the local kindergarten and she does not own a car. Another 25 year old mother, in comparison, may not necessarily rely on these local services due to the fact that she works in the next regional city where her children also visit the kindergarten. She buys her food there or uses the bank office. And the same conclusion can be drawn to a 70 year old retired husband. “The chances to live a good and happy life and to grasp capabilities are highly dependent on an individual’s skills, capacities, and interest. Institutional, political, and cultural frames are at least as important as the individual’s properties which are by no means external or material but are being reproduced as emergent action patterns. [...] Also “spatial origin” influences capabilities. Neighbourhood, local communities, and

the supply with public goods and services (e.g. health, education, and culture) contribute differently to realising capabilities. These in turn are determined by sufficient demand which in turn is influenced by demographic processes. Place-based identities culminate into a fuzzy amalgam of multi-layered, multi-scaled, and more or less dynamic spheres of relations" (Koch, 2012: 16).

The need to complexify descriptive and explanatory approaches of demographic change implications can thus be derived from the multi-dimensional and influential forces that inevitably affect the development of strategic programmes of planning authorities, political stakeholders, scientists, and entrepreneurs. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is to shift from (aggregated) structures to (disaggregated) processes. Local and regional communities emerge, alter, and maintain in multiple and different ways. Collective belongings, power relations, or recognition are rather explainable by exclusion and inclusion mechanisms than by class structures. Furthermore, a changing awareness of processes of participation and local empowerment, commonly phrased as governance, arose. All this culminates in a perspective shift from -isms to -ings: temporalizing, spacing, communitarizing, and contextualizing are increasingly worth analysing. Löw (2001: 131), among others, has put this shift in thinking space by defining space "[...] as a relational order and collocation of bodies and social goods". With this she describes the complementary interrelation of structure and process as "spacing" and "synthesis" (ibid. 158).

Similar structures may lead to significantly different functions, and vice versa. General ascriptions to ageing of population, qualitative out-migration (of highly qualified, younger households) and in-migration (of less educated but highly flexible people), and increasingly homogeneous, fragmented, and polarised regions do not lose their explanatory meaning. Furthermore, we have to encounter a variety of social changes. "Positions, roles, and relations became more diverse and conflict-laden, and face-to-face and virtual contacts do have a comparable meaning. Family constellations became increasingly fuzzy, gender ascriptions require negotiations, and flexibility takes a toll on nearly every aspect of life" (Koch, 2012: 10f). In order to coherently and accurately link similar structures with dissimilar functional relationships, it is necessary to dis-aggregate common phrases, i.e. to localize it, with respect to communities in a specific time frame. Then it is properly possible to cope with demographic phenomena tied to issues like quality of life, social inequality and injustice, or intangible infrastructures as appropriate mediators for a modern understanding of Lebenswelt.

#### **4. Societal Challenges of Demographic Alterations**

The interrelated societal implications caused and/or effected by demographic change differ from region to region, they vary in time and with respect to social communities considered. Additionally, they vary with the scale (the modifiable units) across all these dimensions. Societal challenges, therefore, ought to be evaluated by a definition of local-regional disparities which stresses the constructive nature of the perspective and the degree of severity chosen to act programmatically on demographic problems. In so doing, we refer to Maretzke (2006: 473; translation A.K.) who defines regional disparities as "[...] deviations of specific measures, valuated as relevant, from a theoretical reference distribution [...] which refers to a selected spatial level (or scale)".

It points out that the measures, the statistical techniques and the spatial reference are by no means objective. Furthermore, societal challenges should keep in mind the interdependent linkage of driving forces. Spaces affected of an ageing population, a decrease of income, in-migration, etc. are being produced by societal conditions and reproduced by the affected domains themselves. National policies as well as regulatory mechanisms of labour markets and welfare systems are core forces of a top-down determination, while local housing policies and regional development strategies provide a more bottom-up ground for creating and re-creating patterns of disparities (Dangschat, 2009: 255). Social-spatial fragmentation and polarization are contemporarily well-known phenomena, and demographic change is – in conjunction with the weakness of state finance and de-economic trends – one of its major forces (Kaltenbrunner, 2006; Augeneder et al. 2011).

Transforming implications into challenges initiates new perspectives on dealing with demographic topics which comprises ideas like “adopting local knowledge”, “accepting social heterogeneity”, “explicating indigenous, gender, and migrants’ needs”, or “rising awareness of the qualitative domains of demographic transformations”. All these topics are discussed by the authors of this volume – partly explicit, partly more implicit. With this perspective another shift emerges, a shift from economic to social values. All these topics point out that it is worth considering local knowledge and experience as an intrinsic value to cope with specific circumstances, claims, and needs on very diverse issues of very diverse social groups on very diverse places. Complementary, local knowledge and experience is not restricted to the individual, place and moment; it encompasses other scales as well, because (spatial and cognitive) mobility shines regionally and globally.

A popular method in this respect is available by social space analysis (e.g. Riege and Schubert 2005). Local knowledge can be applied to better understand specific ethnic and population groups like migrants, elderly people, youth, or single parent families in order to develop collectively ideas for a good neighbourhood living. Moreover, it can be used to confront results of regional disparity analyses with local idiosyncratic conditions. And exactly doing this means to apply complexity thinking seriously, because dis-aggregating knowledge about demographic problems may activate an awareness on these problems which in turn specifies and differentiates the knowledge on averages and standard deviations derived from aggregated data.

Local knowledge and experience has its own quality. From a practical point of view one can critically question whether or not a concrete activity may be useful in a concrete spatial, social, and temporal context. The literature on this topic provides quite qualitative insights (e.g. for medical infrastructures in Finland see Varesmaa-Korhonen, 2003; for educational infrastructures in Sweden see Arefäll, 2003). What else can be learned from these studies is this important tie of local knowledge with both tangible and intangible infrastructures, as pointed out by Robertson (2006: 7): “All inhabited landscape holds cultural meaning, emotional significance that is a product of interaction with the land over time. These less observable facets of landscape include its atmosphere and sentimental value. The phrase ‘sense of place’ is also used to describe these meanings. Commonly, sense of place refers to the positive attachment people hold for the environments in which they live, those intangible qualities, built up over time, that make landscapes ‘special and worth defending’. [...] A part of what makes places special is their capacity to provide inhabitants with a sense of rootedness [...]”.

These challenges are contextually framed by the spatial reference to the Alpine Region. The general background of all contributions is based on thoughts and practical assumptions which focus on demographic changes in peripheral and rural regions where migration patterns and processes imply quantitatively and qualitatively pressure and solutions concerning homogenisation (e.g. in tourism), infrastructural decline, increased ethnic diversity, and decreased social solidarity (at least in some respects).

In order to cope successfully with these challenges it might be useful to incorporate the concept of resilience and linking it with the idea of sustainability. Sustainability is hardly to achieve in regions which have been or will be significantly transformed by demographic changes. In connection with resilience, however, a more adapted approach is applicable – again, by explicitly being aware of the complex nature of change in its diverse explications. Resilience indicates the capacity and capability – of individuals, communities, and regions – to deal with exogenous vulnerabilities and to resist a decline in functioning (Reivich and Shattle, 2002; Ungar, 2004; Walker and Salt, 2006). “Exogenous” intrinsically refers to different domains and scales.

Community resilience enables to incorporate the above mentioned challenges in a – at least theoretically – comprehensive way. As Magis (2010: 402) points out: “[...] community resilience is the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. [...] The community resilience dimensions are community resources, development of community resources, engagement of community resources, active agents, collective action,

strategic action, equity, and impact". It is worth emphasising the issue of engagement, because community resilience "[...] is about action taken, not simply capacity to act" (ibid. 405). This de facto executed "capacity to act" directs to the similar idea of different forms of capitals, as it was introduced by Bourdieu (2005) and others. In this context, Flora and Flora (2004) recently introduced the idea of community capitals as a means of collective capability to adapt to and to proactively shape exogenous influences. Herewith, a more pronounced focus on social well-being and social justice is indicated, too.

This discourse on social or community resilience has contemporarily been transformed into the spatial domain (e.g. Chapple and Lester, 2007; Foster, 2007). Pike et al. (2010: 61) present a spatially referenced definition of resilience which includes social system connections: "Resilience here is understood as whether or not and to what degree and in what time frame a spatial unit can return to its pre-shock position and level of output or employment". In all these definitions an implicit liability towards sustainable developments can be read out. Such understanding simultaneously pursues an approach that criticises equilibrium-state approaches and advocates for a contingent and path-dependent approach instead. In order to qualify this approach Pike et al. introduce a distinction between adaptation and adaptability. While adaptation represents a more short-term reaction to vulnerabilities coupled with the adoption of *strong* local and regional ties, adaptability refers to as a long-term perspective of a suitable handling with crisis, applying *weak* ties over all scales. "Adaptation and adaptability can be seen as a tension with each other, as explanations of different kinds of resilience. In contrast to the equilibrium-based view that interprets resilience as a generic feature and quality of a closed system, adaptation and adaptability are dialectically related in an inherent tension within a more open system that has to be accommodated or brought into balance by social agents" (Pike et al., 2010: 62).

## 5. Conclusion

Demographic change, its problems and potentials, its subtle and perceivable results, is not falling from heaven. Instead, it is man-made; it is economically, culturally and politically influenced and, in this sense, a contemporary mirror image of our societal conditions. Nevertheless, everybody can do a lot to strengthen solidarity and social well-being. This is not only illustrated by the contexts of the contributions, but by the contributors as well. Moving from knowledge to action and from simplification to complexification is thus a desirable step forward.

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