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Published in:
Sociologia e politiche sociali

DOI:
[10.3280/SP2016-003008](https://doi.org/10.3280/SP2016-003008)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de Vries, W. M., van der Veen, E., Bock, B. B., Christiaanse, S., & Haartsen, T. (2016). The perceived importance of facilities for rural citizens in Fryslân, the Netherlands. *Sociologia e politiche sociali*, 19(3), 119-137. <https://doi.org/10.3280/SP2016-003008>

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The perceived importance of facilities for rural citizens in Fryslân, the Netherlands

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Abstract

Many rural regions in Europe are confronted with population decline and concomitantly a decline in facilities such as shops, banks and post offices, as well as basic services such as education, health care and public transport. In this paper we discuss the situation in the province of Fryslân, in the North of the Netherlands, as an example of how changes in the number of facilities matter for rural inhabitants, even in the rural areas of a densely populated and highly urbanised country. This paper starts with examining changes in the availability and accessibility of facilities. We then explore which facilities are perceived as important to maintain in the village, and how villagers expect to react to their disappearance. The results show the impact of rural facility decline differs across space and population groups, and needs to be understood “in context” – the context of everyday life, including varying levels of mobility.

Keywords

Facilities, Rural Citizens, Mobility, Fryslân

1. Introduction

Many rural regions in Europe are confronted with population decline and concomitantly a decline in facilities among which shops, banks and post offices, as well as basic services such as education, health care and public transport. In the Netherlands it is not population decline itself which has contributed most to the decline in facilities; following several studies it is the increased mobility of citizens and changing shopping behaviour as well as economies of scale which have played a more important role thus far (Van Dam 1995; Steenbekkers and Vermeij 2013). This may be explained by the fact

that in comparison to other European rural areas, the Dutch countryside is densely populated, has a well-developed road network and high levels of personal mobility. However, future predictions of increasing rural depopulation, ageing and out-migration of rural youth are expected to increasingly affect the number of rural facilities and the level of rural service provision (Haartsen and Venhorst 2010; Haartsen and Van Wissen 2012). In this paper we discuss the situation in the Netherlands as an example of how changes in the number of facilities matter for rural inhabitants, even in the rural areas of a densely populated and highly urbanised country.

In scientific literature, the terms facilities and services are often used interchangeably (Stockdale 1993; White et al. 1997) although there is a conceptual difference. “Facility” refers to the specific geographical location where a service is offered, such as a supermarket, primary school, community centre or café. “Service” refers to the service that is offered, for instance food supply, education, health care or recreation. Some facilities may offer, hence, several services. And public transport, for instance, is one of the services that are not geographically located, although the actual bus stop does count as a facility. In this paper, we mainly use the term facilities, because we discuss the physical presence of facilities in rural villages. However, we may use the term services, if we refer to the service that is offered.

This paper examines changes in the availability and accessibility of facilities in rural areas in the Netherlands. We also explore which facilities are perceived as important to maintain in the village, and how villagers expect to react to their disappearance. This paper, hence, discusses how inhabitants experience the (envisioned) decline of facilities and services next to presenting the facts and figures on changing numbers of facilities. In doing so it demonstrates that the impact of changes in the availability and accessibility of facilities differs across space and population groups, and needs to be understood “in context” – the context of everyday life. Differences across space are explored by differentiating facility developments for three types of villages: small, medium-sized and large villages. In order to understand if there are specific groups of residents at risk, we differentiate for socio-demographic variables, modes of daily transport and geographical orientation.

Our analysis focuses on the situation in the province of Fryslân, in the North of the country, which is one of the most rural regions of the Netherlands (Haartsen et al. 2003). Data from Statistics Netherlands and two citizens panels in Fryslân are used. After discussing the methodology, the paper presents current trends in the availability and accessibility of facilities. It then reports on the perceived importance of the availability of facilities, and stated reactions to their potential

decline. We conclude with some reflections on how to interpret concerns about rural facility decline in relatively densely populated and urbanised countries where even relatively peripheral areas present quite favourable conditions compared with other rural areas in Europe.

2. Processes of restructuring of facilities and services

For decades, European rural areas have been confronted with closures of public and private facilities and services as a result of the following simultaneously occurring processes. The first are rationalisation processes in capitalist economies, resulting in larger corporations buying up smaller, local enterprises and in scale enlargement of facilities and services (Van Dam 1995). Changing consumer behaviour is referred to as a second important factor (Brereton et al. 2011; Van Dam 1995; Woods 2005). Modern consumers tend to prefer shopping where there is a more expanded offer of supply and, hence, in bigger shops or online; with increased private car ownership and internet access this has come into reach of many rural consumers as well (Brereton et al. 2011). As a result, many village facilities and services have lost clients to facilities and service providers in neighbouring towns and regional centres, and have been unable to maintain their business (Steenbekkers and Vermeij 2013). A third related process has to do with welfare state reforms and developments towards the so-called Big Society (Bock 2016). In recent decades, and in particular after the global financial crisis, policymakers across Europe have cut budgets for public services, requiring services to function cost-effectively or otherwise reorganise their offer; they have privatised services and/or delegated the responsibility for the maintenance of service levels to regional or local governments. This has hit in particular the less populated rural areas, which face higher costs in relation to client numbers and have generally less tax income at their disposal.

The abovementioned rationalisation and disappearance of rural facilities and services is enhanced by rural depopulation which undermines the cost effectiveness of facilities and services. However, the relation between population and facility decline is not straightforward and it is important to take account of the pertinent and increasing differences across rural areas. There are rural regions in Europe that face depopulation as a result of declining birth rates, ageing populations and increasing youth out-migration (Manthorpe and Livsey 2009; Milbourne 2007; Thissen et al. 2010). Other rural

areas may count on a stable or even increasing population as a result of counterurbanisation (Shucksmith et al. 2009; Halfacree 2008). In part these differences may be explained geographically, with a higher chance of population decline in areas that are remotely located and at great distance of metropolitan regions (Bock et al. 2015). Material accessibility makes a difference as well, in terms of the availability of highways, airport or other means of high speed transport, as well as inaccessibility due to natural obstructions such as mountains or water. However, if and to what extent rural areas have become accessible is also a result of their level of attraction. Some more popular rural areas are in high demand and attracting residents as well as infrastructural investments. Others are less-popular or “peripheral”, not necessarily in geographical location, but socio-economically, which includes social and political appreciation such as reflected among others in national public investments and, for instance, the support for maintaining the level of public services (Amin et al. 2003; Bijker and Haartsen 2012; Bijker et al. 2013).

The above sketched development towards depopulation and increasing regional differentiation is well known for the more remotely located regions in Northern and Southern Europe, and has been described for Central Eastern Europe also as a result of post socialist transitions (Shucksmith et al. 2009). However, in recent years, population decline has become more common in rural areas in Western Europe too and even in countries as densely populated and highly urbanised as the Netherlands. Many of these regions have been accustomed to high levels of services and see themselves quite suddenly confronted with the loss of basic facilities, also as result of welfare state reform. In the Netherlands, population decline is not as dramatic as in other European countries yet sufficient in size and speed to cause concern among citizens and policymakers – concern about the current situation as well as expectation of the future in case of ongoing trends of population decline and ageing (Haartsen and Venhorst 2010). Rural residents fear for their own access to necessary facilities and services, especially health care and education, yet also fear that the decline in services may cause a cycle of further overall decline in terms of the local economy and quality of life (Haartsen and Van Wissen 2012; Skerrat 2010).

3. Methods and data

The case of Fryslân

Fryslân is one of twelve provinces of the Netherlands and has a total of 646.257 inhabitants in 2015. Within the Netherlands this province has a relatively peripheral location in the North of the country (Fig. 1), at quite some distance from the population centres. There are no physical barriers in the landscape but there is a long coastline which limits the directions of orientation.

Within the Netherlands, Fryslân is a less densely populated area with an average of 194 inhabitants per square kilometre, against 502 inhabitants in the Netherlands in average. It is generally considered as one of the most rural regions of the country (Haartsen et al. 2003). Following OECD definitions of rural areas based on population density the Netherlands mainly has intermediate rural areas, with only 7% of the Dutch population living in rural areas (OECD 2008). This definition does not correspond with the general perception and experience of Dutch citizens of whom about a third considers themselves as residents of rural areas (Steenbekkers et al. 2008). Neither does it correspond with definitions used in Dutch statistics, according to which Fryslân contains only three urban and 24 rural municipalities. More than half of the 419 Frisian settlements have less than 500 inhabitants. Only 21 settlements count more than 5000 inhabitants, of which only four (Leeuwarden, Drachten, Sneek and Heerenveen) with at least 25.000 inhabitants. This means that almost the whole province is considered to be rural area.



Fig. 1 - Map of the Netherlands, with the province of Fryslân in red

Until 2011 the population in Fryslân increased. Since 2012, however, population decreased by 0.1% per year mainly due to out-migration (De Vries 2015). In the last decade it was especially the rural population that declined, and in particular in small villages up to 500 inhabitants (-3.6%) (Fig. 2). A considerable part of the province is therefore in recent years appointed by the central government as a so-called (anticipatory) “shrinking region” which is expected to confront a decline in population and/or households above 2.5% until 2040 (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2015). Population decline also affects the population structure. It is generally the young and well-educated who move to the cities, as a result of which the percentages of elderly residents (above 65 years) and of residents with rather low income and low education increase.

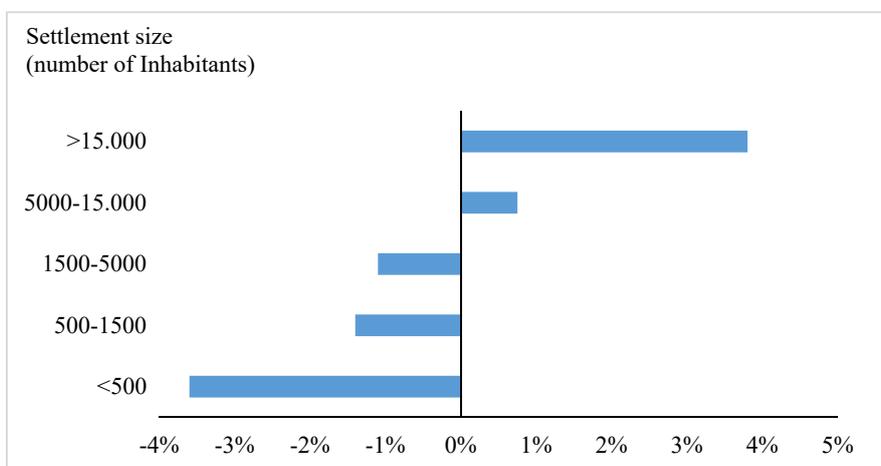


Fig. 2 - Population growth rate according to settlement size in Fryslân, in 2015 relative to 2005 (in %)

Source: FSP database (2015)

Data

In our analyses of current trends in facility decline and the perceived importance of facilities, we use two types of data. First, information about the availability and accessibility of facilities in the province of Fryslân is derived from data collected by Statistics Netherlands. Second, for the analyses of facility decline and the perceived importance of facilities in villages in Fryslân we use data from two surveys held among a Frisian citizens panel in June 2015 and April 2016. This Frisian citizens panel consists of a sample of 2278 adult Frisian citizens (above 18 years). The panel is a self-selection panel. Citizens of the province of Fryslân could register after a recruitment campaign in local papers, ads and direct mail. The sample is not fully representative due to some oversampling of men, higher educated citizens and citizens above 50 years.

The panel is managed by the Frisian Institute for Social Research (FSP) and used to inform policy makers and media on social issues in the area. Recently, two digital panel surveys were completed that concerned the use of and satisfaction with public services. In June 2015 1798 respondents evaluated the importance of local services and reported on their private means of transport and use of services at local, regional or national level. In April 2016, 1434 respondents assessed the importance and availability of six services in their village including the supermarket, primary school, general practitioner, cash machine, community centre and public transport. These services are considered as vital for the quality of life in rural communities (Carrosio this issue).

For the purpose of this article, only the data of *rural* respondents is used, including 753 rural respondents participating in both surveys in 2015 and 2016. Rural residents are selected based on the size of the population of their place of residence. As we expected population size to influence the availability and assessment of services, we distinguished between small villages (less than 500 inhabitants), medium-sized villages (500-1500 inhabitants) and large villages (1500-5000 inhabitants). Of the panel 23% is living in small villages, 43% in medium-sized villages and 34% in large villages. In table 1 the characteristics of the rural respondents of the panel are presented. The respondent group is balanced for what concerns gender and income but there is some overrepresentation of older and higher educated residents, compared with the total population of rural Fryslân.

	<i>Small villages</i>		<i>Medium-sized villages</i>		<i>Large villages</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Respondents	175	23	323	43	255	34	753	100
Age categories								
18-34	7	4	18	6	10	4	35	5
35-49	22	13	48	15	45	18	115	15
50-64	80	46	131	41	112	44	323	43
65+	66	38	126	39	88	35	280	37
Yearly income								
Low (<€ 33.000)	38	27	79	31	76	37	193	32
Middle (€ 33.000-37.000)	48	34	87	35	62	30	197	33
High (>€ 37.000)	55	39	86	34	68	33	209	35
Gender								
Women	82	47	140	43	128	50	350	47
Men	93	53	183	57	127	50	403	53
Education level								
Low	34	20	95	30	64	25	193	26
Middle	60	34	101	31	82	32	243	32
High	81	46	127	39	109	43	317	42

Table 1 - Rural respondents of panel, by village size
Source: Frisian citizens panel (2015)

In our analyses, we will relate figures on facilities to the abovementioned socio-demographic characteristics of our respondents, but also to their mobility and their geographical orientation as demonstrated in the outreach of their mobility. In terms of mobility, most of respondents use a car or bicycle as their primary mode of transport (Tab. 2), and rarely use public transport even though it is available in most of the villages. In the small and medium-sized villages about two third of the respondents use the car on a daily basis, with little difference across age categories. The second most important daily means of transport is the bicycle, especially in larger villages, certainly when taking account of the electric bicycles (or e-bikes) too. They are particularly important for elderly residents, of whom 19% uses the e-bike on a daily basis, as it allows those with a car or driver's licence to cover larger distances than with a regular bicycle.

	<i>Car</i>	<i>Bicycle</i>	<i>E-bike</i>	<i>Public transport</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>N</i>
Small villages	65%	23%	10%	5%	3%	175
Medium-sized villages	62%	30%	14%	4%	2%	323
Large villages	53%	42%	11%	6%	1%	255

Table 2 –How often do you use the following means of transport? Difference by village size (table shows daily use only)¹
Source: Frisian citizens panel (2015)

In terms of geographical orientation, as demonstrated in the outreach of their mobility, a respondent who leaves his/her place of residence at max twice a week is considered to have a local orientation. Those who leave the place of residence more often, but do not leave Fryslân, are considered to be regionally oriented. Those who leave Fryslân at least once a week, are identified as having an interregional orientation. As table 3 demonstrates, respondents from small and medium-sized villages are generally more regionally oriented compared to respondents from large villages.

	<i>Local</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Interregional</i>	<i>N</i>
Small villages	10%	64%	26%	175
Medium-sized villages	17%	61%	22%	323

¹ The total is not 100%, residents may use more than one mode of transport per day.

Large villages	23%	57%	20%	255
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Table 3 - Type of geographical orientation by village size in %

Source: Frisian citizens panel (2015)

3. Facility decline in Fryslân

The availability of facilities in the province of Fryslân

The decline of facilities in Dutch rural areas is a long term process, which started already in the 1970s and has been influenced by changing consumer behaviour and a general tendency towards scale enlargement (Van Dam 1995). It is only quite recently that demographic decline is showing effect as a result of sub-replacement fertility rates in combination with increasing out-migration of young residents in search of higher education and employment (Kooiman et al. 2016). The overall direction of change is clear with reduced numbers and varieties of facilities in smaller villages and their concentration in the somewhat larger villages and regional centres (Steenbekkers and Vermeij 2013).

The same is taking place in Fryslân and is reflected in a decrease or standstill in the development of facilities (Fig. 3). The latter is true with the exception of the number of GP practices, which has increased between 2000 and 2014. For what regards supermarkets stores we see a decrease of 14% in Fryslân whereas the number has slightly increased (+1%) at national level (LISA 2015). The decline is mainly caused by a fall in the number of smaller supermarkets, whereas the number of larger supermarkets grew. In the same period, the number of primary schools in the province has decreased by 7%. Again this percentage is higher than the nationwide decline of 4% (LISA 2015). Also, the decrease of banks (and cash machines) as a consequence of the financial crisis is in Fryslân with 67% higher than the national decrease of 60%.

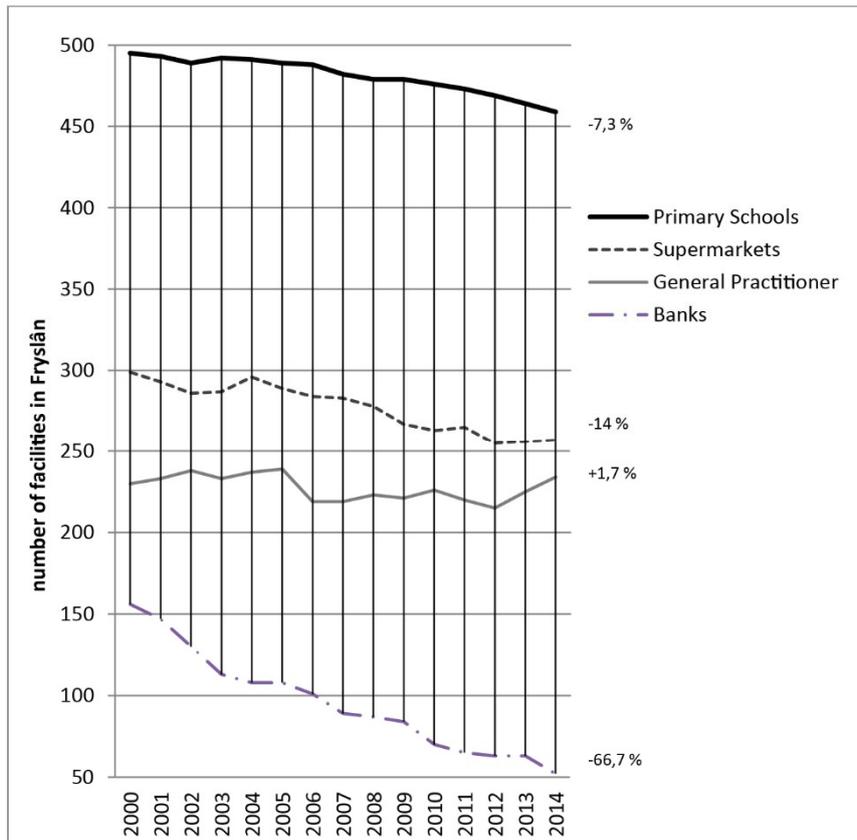


Fig. 3- Decline or increase of facilities in number and % in Fryslân, in the period 2000-2014

Source: LISA database (2015) Edited by S. Christiaanse

The distance to facilities in Fryslân is on average somewhat higher than in the Netherlands, although there is only for a limited number of facilities information available on this. In Fryslân the average distance to a supermarket is in 2014 1.3 km compared to the national average of 1 km. A general practitioner in Fryslân in 2014 is on average available at a distance of 1.4 km while this is 1 km on the national average. And a primary school in Fryslân at a distance of 0.8 km and nationwide on 0.7 km (CBS 2016). Nevertheless there are considerable differences within Fryslân. Particularly in small villages in Fryslân the average distances have often increased in recent years. For example, in the small village of Jouswier in the northern part of Fryslân, the average distance to a large supermarket has increased from 2.1 km in 2008 to 4.7 km in 2014. In the village of Jelsum the average distance to a general

practitioner has increased from 2.6 km in 2008 to 3.3 km in 2014. The closure of the primary school in Abbega, a small village in the southwestern part of the province, meant for the inhabitants an increase of the distance to the next school from 0.1 to 4.0 km (CBS 2016).

With the decline in public transport and increasing distances to facilities, private means of transport have become increasingly important in rural areas, with special importance attached to cars and (electric) bicycles as we will see in the following.

The availability of facilities in Frisian villages

One of the objectives of the Frisian citizens panel is to assess the availability of facilities and to examine citizen satisfaction by way of regular surveys. In this particular case, the panel was asked to evaluate the availability of the following six facilities in their villages: the supermarket, cash machine, general practitioner, primary school, public transport and community centre.

The responses of the citizens panel clearly demonstrate that the availability of the six facilities differs by village size. Whereas citizens of larger villages indicate that the six facilities are generally available, this is less the case among citizens of medium-sized villages and small villages (Tab.4). It is the availability of supermarkets, cash machines and general practitioners which differs most; their presence is acknowledged by almost all respondents of large villages, by less than half of the respondents living in medium-sized villages and by only very few of the respondents living in a small village. Just 7% of the respondents of small villages indicate that there is a supermarket or cash machine in their village; according to 11% of them there is a general practitioner. The availability of public transport and primary education differs also by village size, whereas this is hardly the case for community centres. Community centres are very common in all three types of villages, and in small villages they are even more often available than in medium-sized and large villages.

	<i>Super-market</i>	<i>Cash machine</i>	<i>General practitioner</i>	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Public transport</i>	<i>Community centre</i>
Small villages N=175	7%	7%	11%	59%	73%	93%
Medium-sized villages N=323	40%	24%	41%	96%	84%	83%
Large villages N=255	91%	95%	93%	99%	89%	92%

Level of significance	,000**	,000**	,000**	,000**	,000**	,000**
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Significance = **p<0.01, based on Pearson Chi-Square Test

Table 4 - Are the following facilities available in your village? Difference by village size (percentage that answered "yes" is showed; level of significance for the impact of village size)

Source: Frisian citizens panel (2016)

When asked since when certain facilities were no longer available in their village, it appears that supermarkets, cash machines and public transport have often been lost for more than three years in the small and medium-sized villages (Fig. 4). In medium-sized villages also the general practitioner has been lost, if so mostly for more than three years. The closure of primary schools is, however, a quite recent phenomenon, particularly in small villages. This corresponds with the relatively sharp decline in the numbers of pupils that a lot of Dutch rural areas have experienced recently (Haartsen and Van Wissen 2012). Further, the figure shows that the private services (supermarket, cash machine and general practitioner) have disappeared more often in small and medium-sized villages compared to the semi-public services. In larger villages it appears that cash machines are recently lost. This seems to be related to the closure of banks and less demand for cash money,

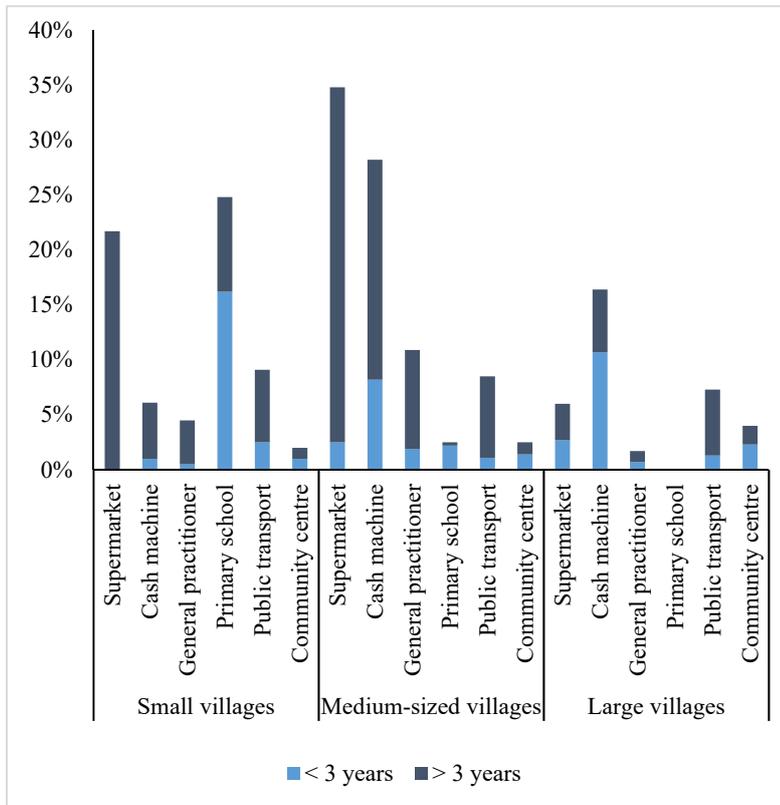


Fig. 4- In case of absent facilities: Since when is this facility no longer available? Difference by village size

Source: Frisian citizens panel (2016).

4. Perceived importance of facilities

Importance attached to facilities

It is interesting to see that especially the residents of large villages attach importance to the availability of the six earlier mentioned facilities. This is far less the case for residents of smaller and medium-sized villages with the exception of primary schools, public transport and the community centres (Tab. 5). Although the community centre is seen as very important in all three types of villages, it is most often seen as (very) important in the small villages (85%) compared to 77% in medium-sized villages and 84% in large villages. The availability of primary schools and public transport, however, scores high in importance across all village sizes too.

	<i>Super-market</i>	<i>Cash machine</i>	<i>General practitioner</i>	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Public transport</i>	<i>Community centre</i>
Small villages N=175	35%	38%	35%	67%	71%	85%
Medium-sized villages N=323	62%	65%	70%	86%	79%	77%
Large villages N= 255	87%	88%	93%	89%	85%	84%
Level of significance	.000**	.000**	.000**	.000**	.022**	.276

Significance = **p<0.01 and *p<0.05, based on Pearson Chi-Square Test

Table 5 - How important do you think the presence of the following facilities are in your village? Difference by village size (percentage (very) important is showed; level of significance for the impact of village size)

Source: Frisian citizens panel (2016)

As table 5 demonstrates there is a clear relation between the availability of facilities and importance attached to them by village size. We checked in a similar way if there is also a relation with age, gender, income, education, primary means of transport and geographical orientation, making use of a Pearson chi-square test (and alpha level of significance < 0.05). This relation appears to differ across facility type. It is especially elderly citizens who attach significantly more importance to the presence of community centres and general practitioners compared to younger citizens (p=0.048 resp. p=0.014). Women attach more importance to public transport compared to men (p=0.037), particularly in small villages. Supermarkets are considered most important by citizens with a lower income (p=0.004), whereas it is those with a medium income who are most concerned about the presence of a primary school (p=0.005). Level of education does not seem to make a difference. Means of transport matters as follows: those who primary move by car or bike attach most importance to the availability of public transport (p=0.006 resp. p=0.022), whereas those using mainly e-bikes seem to be particularly attached to the presence of cash machines (p=0.013), and those with a local orientation consider the availability of primary schools (p=0.008) and cash machines (p=0.004) more important compared to those who are (inter)regionally oriented. We may conclude, hence, that those who are less mobile in terms of access to

private means of transport (because of age and income) attach more importance to the availability of services in their own village.

Stated reactions to closure

Especially residents of large and medium-sized villages stated to be most disappointed when asked how they would react to the disappearance of facilities (Tab. 6). It is clear, however, that it matters which facility is lost. Respondents from medium-sized villages expect most often to be (very) disappointed if the primary school disappears. Small village residents were the least concerned about the disappearance of facilities such as supermarkets, general practitioners and cash machines. Those facilities are already scarce in small villages. They are most worried about the eventual loss of their community centre. The fact that the community centre is often one of the very few remaining facilities, that often offers room for different services and functions as a local meeting place, may be expected to play an important role here.

	<i>Super-market</i>	<i>Cash machine</i>	<i>General practitioner</i>	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Public transport</i>	<i>Community centre</i>
Small villages N=175	34%	27%	30%	69%	73%	90%
Medium-sized villages N=323	69%	54%	60%	80%	77%	76%
Large villages N= 255	88%	80%	88%	88%	81%	75%
Level of significance	.000**	.000**	.000**	.000**	.053	.000**

Significance = **p<0.01 based on Pearson Chi-Square Test

Table 6 - Suppose the following facilities are in danger of disappearing (or have already disappeared), could you indicate for each facility to what extent you would be disappointed? Difference by village size (percentage (very) disappointed is showed; level of significance for the impact of village size)

Source: Frisian citizens panel (2016)

The extent of citizens' stated disappointment about the loss of facilities differs significantly across village size but also by income and education, primary means of transport and geographical orientation. There is little difference, however, by age and gender. Low income respondents state to be most distressed if the supermarket ($p=0.000$), general practitioner ($p=0.000$) and cash machine ($p=0.001$) disappeared, whereas high income respondents demonstrate little concern about the loss of any facility. Citizens who are used to travel by bike are discontent about the eventual closure of the primary school ($p=0.001$) and community centre ($p=0.035$), and about eventual reductions in public transport ($p=0.001$). Locally oriented respondents expect to be more disappointed about the loss of a general practitioner ($p=0.004$), community centre ($p=0.032$), public transport ($p=0.045$) and cash machines ($p=0.001$) compared to those who are (inter)regionally orientated. Again we see that those who have less access to private means of transport (because of age and income), and locally oriented respondents claim to be more disappointed when services are no longer locally present.

The closure of facilities may evoke citizen protest which is quite often the case when primary schools are concerned (Haartsen and Van Wissen 2012). The reduction of public transport and closure of community centres provoke citizen action as well. There are several civic initiatives in Fryslân which aim at maintaining local public transport by engaging unpaid volunteer drivers. Others stand up to take over the management of community centres (KKNN 2016). The Frisian citizens panel confirms the stated readiness of rural citizens to take action when services are in danger of disappearing. This readiness, however, differs across village size and is clearly related to the current availability of facilities. Residents of larger villages are willing to fight for almost all of the six facilities, whereas in medium-sized villages this is limited to the closure of the primary school, public transport and the community centre (Tab.7). In small villages it is only the disappearance of the community centre which would motivate a considerable group of citizens to act (53%); to a lesser degree this is true also for public transport (37%) and primary schools (27%). Hardly any of the respondents indicated that they would move to another place if facilities would disappear.

	<i>Super-market</i>	<i>Cash machine</i>	<i>General practitioner</i>	<i>Primary school</i>	<i>Public transport</i>	<i>Community centre</i>
Small villages N=175	7%	10%	10%	27%	37%	53%
Medium-sized villages N=323	15%	14%	17%	31%	27%	33%

Large villages	32%	38%	43%	38%	30%	32%
N= 255						
Total	19%	21%	24%	32%	30%	38%
N=753	140	158	182	242	227	283
Level of significance	.000**	.000**	.000**	.047*	.070	.000**

Significance = **p<0.01 and *p<0.05, based on Pearson Chi-Square Test

Table 7 - Share of respondents who think they will take action when facilities are in danger of disappearing. Difference by village size (level of significance for the impact of village size)

Source: Frisian citizens panel (2016)

The extent of the stated readiness of citizens to take action differs significantly also by means of transport and geographical orientation. There is little difference, however, by age, gender, income and education. Means of transport matters as follows: those who primarily move by bike are most willing to take action when the primary school ($p=0.001$), community centre ($p=0.028$) and cash machine ($p=0.030$) are in danger. Frequent users of e-bikes are ready to take action for general practitioner ($p=0.033$) and cash dispenser ($p=0.007$). Frequent car users are ready to take action for primary school ($p=0.026$) and general practitioner ($p=0.047$). Citizens who make hardly any use of cars are more ready to take action for the cash dispenser ($p=0.000$). Citizens with a local orientation are more ready to take action for the supermarket ($p=0.044$) and cash machine ($p=0.001$). These answers confirm that citizens who are less able to reach distant services by their own private means of transport, are those who worry most and are most motivated to engage for the maintenance of local facilities.

When asking the respondents to assess the importance of facilities or to predict their reaction to the disappearance of services, it was clear that the respondents took account of which facilities are currently available in their place of residence. This explains for instance why residents of small villages are less concerned about the closure of supermarkets, which generally have disappeared already quite some time ago. Level of orientation matters, however, as well. It is generally the elderly ($p=0.000$), those with lower income ($p=0.000$) and low education ($p=0.001$) who are more locally oriented, have no access to a car (low income) or use it less frequently (elderly) and who worry most about the disappearance of facilities – in smaller as well as larger villages. The same is true for those citizens who are less mobile by car or by bike ($p=0.000$). One may, however, expect that it presents most problems for those living in smaller villages given the fact that most services have already disappeared.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Fryslân is known as the most rural area in the Netherlands with many small villages. In most of these villages facility decline has started already several decades ago because of scale enlargement and changing consumer behaviour. Recently, demographic change and population decline are reinforcing this process, resulting in the closure of primary schools and reduction of public transport in particular. This concerns especially the small and medium-sized villages, as facilities tend to be centralised in the larger villages and towns. As a result, many rural citizens now need to travel to the regional centres to access services, such as supermarkets and general practitioners.

For most rural residents this does not seem to pose major problems. As the results of the citizens panel demonstrate, most citizens possess a car or electric bicycle and have become used to travel to the next village or town for shopping, medical services or recreational activities. This is particularly true for those living in the smallest villages, who seem to have accepted that most facilities have already been lost.

Still, many citizens attach great importance to those facilities that (still) are locally available. In small and medium-sized villages, this is in particular the case for the primary school, community centre and public transport. In the large villages, all facilities are considered important. Based on this we conclude that village citizens are attached to the currently available facilities while accepting the loss of facilities that have disappeared in the past. This is also reflected in their stated reactions to a potential loss of facilities. In the small villages the respondents seem to have accepted that most facilities have been lost already and that it is up to the residents themselves to find solutions for accessing services elsewhere. It is interesting to note that residents worry most about the future loss of semi-public facilities, such as the primary school and the community centre, whereas the loss of private services is tolerated and understood.

Our results indicate that rural facility decline has a specific significance in urbanised societies, where alternative services are available in relatively short distances. Here it seems as if it is the change as such which is difficult to cope with, both psychologically and in terms of perceived identity and vitality of the place, whereas most residents manage to handle the actual loss of specific functions at the local level. Related to this, is the finding that the more one is locally oriented, and thereby spending more time in his/her own village, the more important it is for that person to have facilities in their own village. It is striking that this is especially true for citizens of larger villages. This may probably be explained by the fact that they are used to having facilities in their direct proximity.

We may, however, also conclude that facility decline is a problem for those who are less mobile: those who do not own a car or an electric bicycle, or do no longer dare to use it. This is true for elderly and people with lower incomes in

particular. This is also reflected in the variable attachment to certain services. Elderly people are more concerned with the loss of the community centre, cash machine and general practitioner than younger citizens. And citizens with lower incomes worry more about the local availability of supermarket, cash machine and community centre compared with citizens who have higher incomes.

Our results provide food for thought about the vulnerability of certain regions and certain groups. The citizens panel results indicate that there are no major problems yet. This may, however, change in the future. Ongoing population decline affects not only the size of the population but also its composition. As it is especially the young and well educated citizens who leave, the expectation is that the elderly and low educated will be overly represented in remote rural areas. Both groups are also less mobile as we have seen above. And this may increasingly pose problems when the trend towards the decline and centralisation of facilities and services continues.

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