

Shrinking cities and growing regions – emerging trends of new rural-urban relationships in the UK and Germany

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Keywords: rural-urban relations; shrinking cities; regional planning policies; rural economy; Germany; UK

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to discuss and compare new emerging economic relationships between growing rural and shrinking urban areas in England and Germany. Furthermore the paper intends to bring together the contemporary rural development and policy discussion and the current “shrinking cities” debate that evolved in recent years. It is mainly based on an ongoing research project about the North-West of England, namely the Manchester-Liverpool conurbation and its rural hinterland. This is compared to a similar region in Germany, the Ruhrgebiet in North-Rhine Westphalia. While the first example is based on an ongoing research project the German example is mainly based on information from secondary literature.

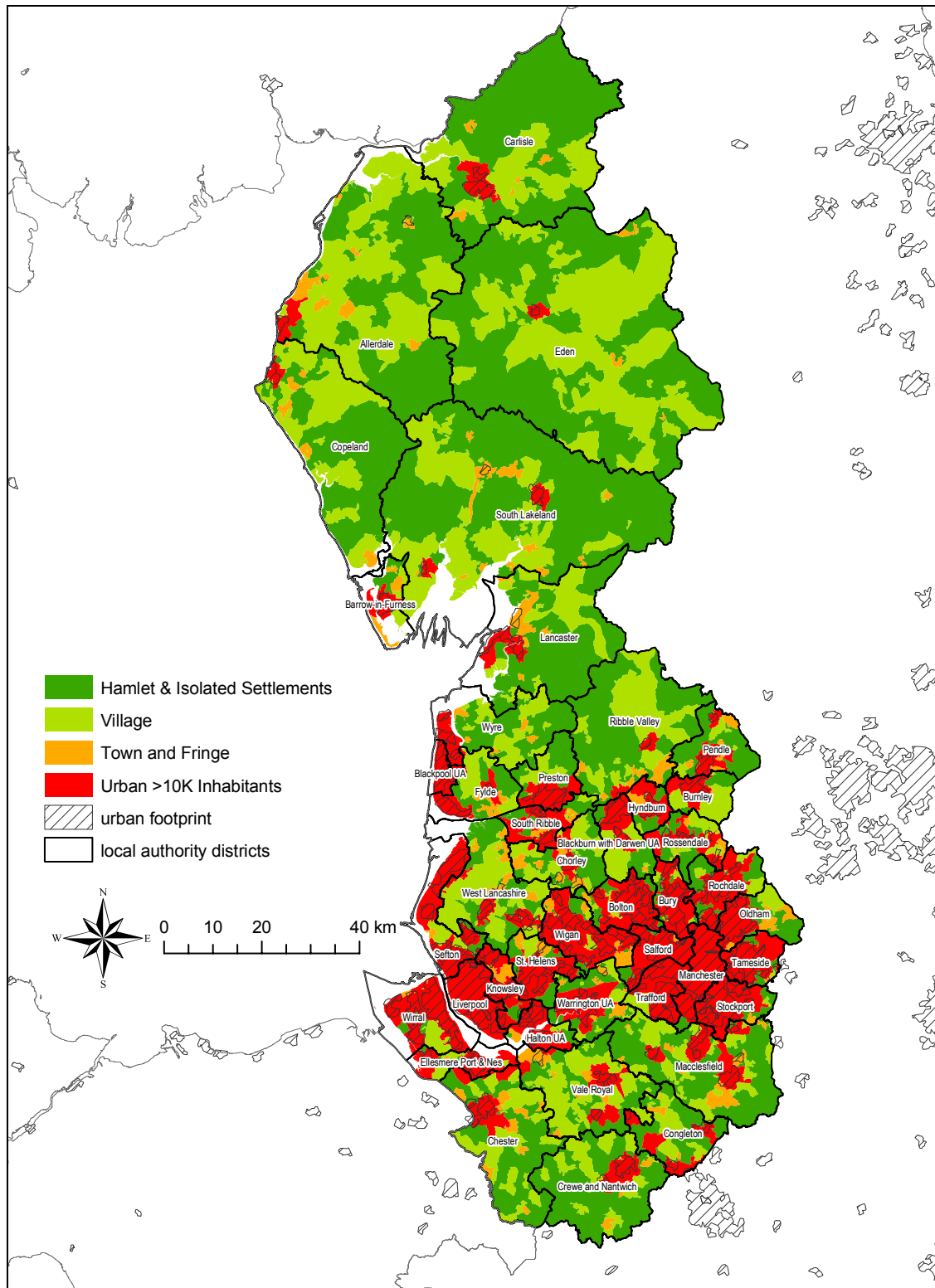
The two cases

The main case discussed in this paper is located in the North-West Government Office Region with a population of about 6.8 million inhabitants. The main conurbation in the South of this region has two distinct centers, Liverpool (about 440,000 inhabitants) and Manchester (432,000 inhabitants). Beyond these center cities a large part of the population lives in the metropolitan counties of Merseyside (1.36 million inhabitants) and Greater Manchester (2.53 million inhabitants)¹. This city-region is surrounded by rural Cheshire in the South (678,000 inhabitants) and Lancashire in the North (1.147 million inhabitants). East of Manchester the Pennines are a natural boundary for the region. The settlement structure of Cheshire is dominated by the regional center Chester and smaller market towns/villages. Lancashire, located north of the conurbation up to Lancaster, contains many small and medium sized cities both at the coast and further inland but also sparse areas in parts of the districts Lancaster and Ribble Valley. There has been a growing debate recently about a Northern Way or a Northern Growth Corridor (Hall 2004) or a Supercity “Coast to Coast” stretching from Liverpool in the West to Hull in the East across the Pennines (Alsop 2005). Many of these and similar discussions have a distinctively urban perspective and they tend to aim at an urban renaissance in the North of England to counterbalance the relative economic success and growth in the South-East around London. But to understand the processes of spatial development and the challenges ahead for planning, I would argue that a wider perspective is necessary. Hence an inclusion of the rural North-West in the equation and its relation to the urban areas is required.

The following map contains the current official classification of rural and urban areas. It has recently been published after a long consultation process by the UK National Statistics. While traditionally a dichotomical differentiation between rural and urban areas was often used to define rural and urban areas, this new definition goes a step further and differentiates between four different categories – from Hamlets & isolated settlements, villages, town & fringe and urban (> 10k inhabitants). Although one might question why not more parts especially in Lancashire are defined as town & fringe, the map gives a good overview of the rural-urban structure in the North-West region.

¹ Population figures taken from 2003 mid-year population estimates of ONS

Rural and Urban area classification in the North-West by ONS



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Illustration 1

Different to the Manchester-Liverpool conurbation with two dominating centers, the Ruhrgebiet has a polycentric structure with no distinct center. Although the city of Essen might claim to be the geographical center of the region this view might be challenged by the cities of Duisburg in the West and Dortmund in the East which are of similar size. The conurbation is located in the West of Germany in the state of North-Rhine-Westphalia. It is surrounded by the rural areas of the Sauerland in the south-east, the Münsterland to the North, the Niederrhein in the West and the Bergisches Land in the South. Towards the South-West there are a number of further large cities including Düsseldorf, Köln and Bonn. Together with the Ruhrgebiet this is sometimes also called the Rhine-Ruhr-City. A similar differentiated official definition of rural and urban areas as in the UK does not exist in Germany. One exception is the BBR that produces a very broad-brushed map on a national level in its Raumordnungsbericht. The absence of an official definition is one indicator for the fact that rural areas are much less important in official planning policies in Germany in comparison to the UK. Therefore as a simple solution the map above shows the so called kreisfreien Städte (large scale unitary authorities) in the land of North Rhine-Westphalia. The map also contains in orange the members of the Regionalverband Ruhrgebiet, a regional body and the only administrative level for the whole Ruhrgebiet.

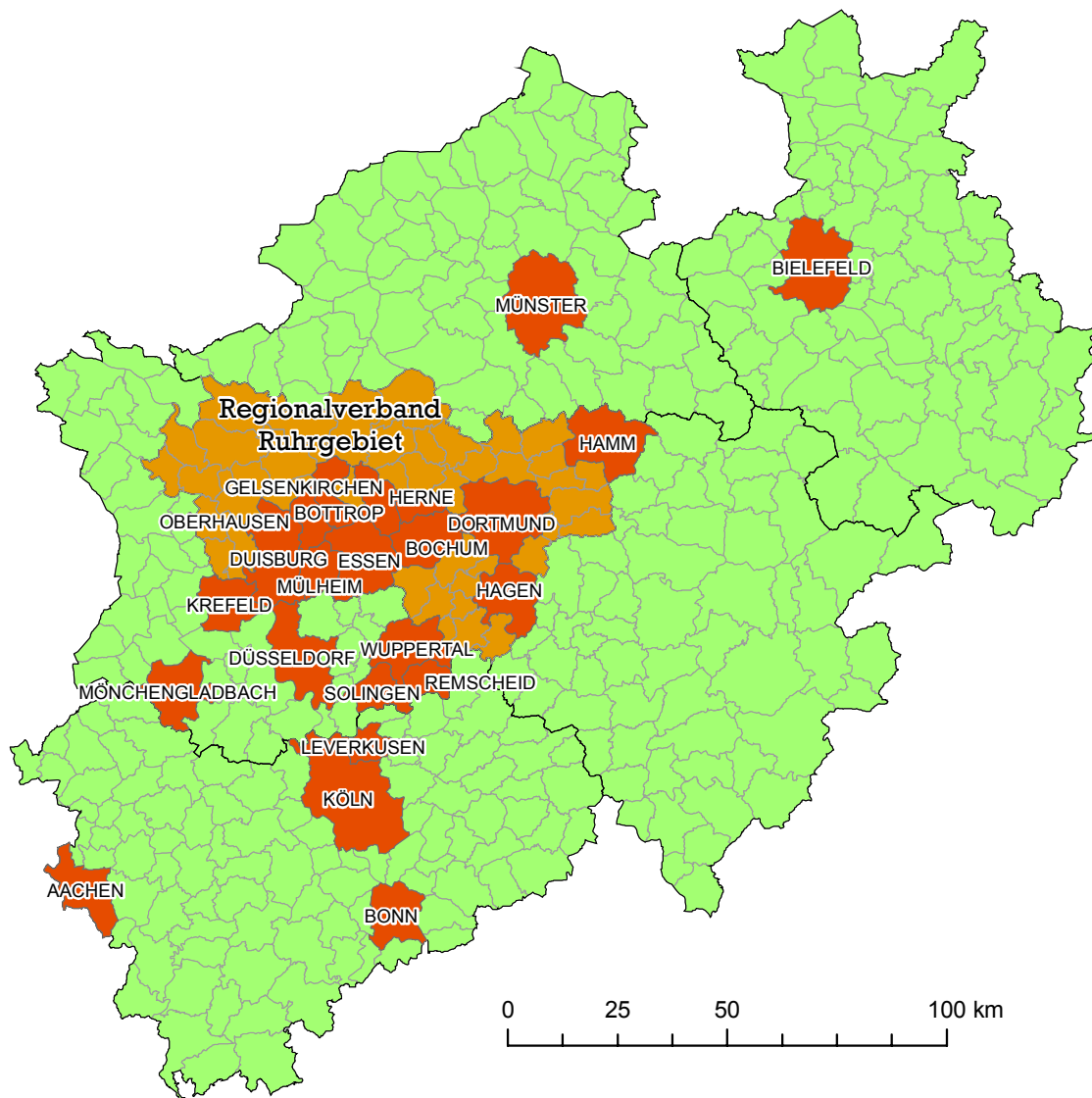


Illustration 2: Kreisfreie Städte und Regionalverband Ruhrgebiet, unitary authorities and regional association Ruhr

Shrinking Cities – an old phenomenon and a new debate

In recent years the phenomenon of shrinking cities is increasingly discussed amongst planners especially in Germany. The main reason for this is that many cities in the east have been facing extreme depopulation since the “Wende” and subsequent reunification in 1989/90. The term shrinking is in this context mainly defined as a process of population decrease. It becomes most visible in the form of vacant buildings or flats in parts of these cities but it has also wider impacts on issues like the public finances of the local authorities and as a result the financing of public infrastructure. It is often argued that this new development poses new challenges towards the planning profession as most traditional development models are aimed at regulating a quasi-natural growth. But in fact the process of population decrease in some large cities already started decades ago. The cities of Manchester and Liverpool were one of the first in the modern era to face this process. To give an example, in the 1930s Liverpool had a population of more than 850,000. In 2003 the population was estimated to be about 440,000 inhabitants, according to ONS. That is one reason why, as part of the debate about shrinking cities, a number of Anglo-German comparative studies were done in recent years. The project shrinking cities initiated by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and the architecture magazine ArchPlus organized an international ideas competition using the examples of Manchester and Liverpool, Halle/Leipzig (Germany), Ivanovo (Russia) and Detroit (USA). Many of the ideas developed in this competition had a clearly urban perspective and barely looked into the wider regional dimension and towards rural areas. Also the combination of decline and sprawl was discussed comparing the city regions of Liverpool and Leipzig (Couch et al 2005). Another publication about the urban regeneration challenge in Leipzig and Manchester asked the question “Shrinking to Grow?” (Mace 2004). Also both these studies clearly focus on the large cities of the region and barely look beyond the boundaries of the city region.

The more recent population changes in the North-West region are illustrated in the following map. It shows the population change per local authority district between the two Census dates 1991 and 2001. When comparing this map with the previous map showing the rural-urban area classification it is obvious that there was a clear population decrease in many urban areas. And this development is not limited to the urban cores of Liverpool and Manchester. Also the wider hinterland of Merseyside and Greater Manchester and many of the manufacturing towns of Lancashire showed a decrease in population in recent years. Many of these areas were the places where large parts of the first phase of out-migration of the core cities moved to. Still the migration pattern follows the classical cascade structure “...from the conurbation to the surrounding semi-urbanized districts and further but smaller net flows to the more rural parts of the region.” (Leather 2004). A similar development can be observed in the Ruhrgebiet as was shown in a recent study (Jeschke 2004). Yet here the estimated future population decrease is not predominantly caused by out-migration but by demographic factors. The more recent population estimates indicate that the core cities of Liverpool and Manchester managed to stop a further decrease of population. The main reason for that might be that there is a strong increase in city centre living in both cities. And the planning system is supporting this development as well. The Urban White Paper asked to use more previously developed land (PDL) to be used for residential development. The metropolitan county of Merseyside has now one of the highest rates in England with about 90 of all residential development being located on PDL (Couch et al 2005).

population change local authority district 1991-2001

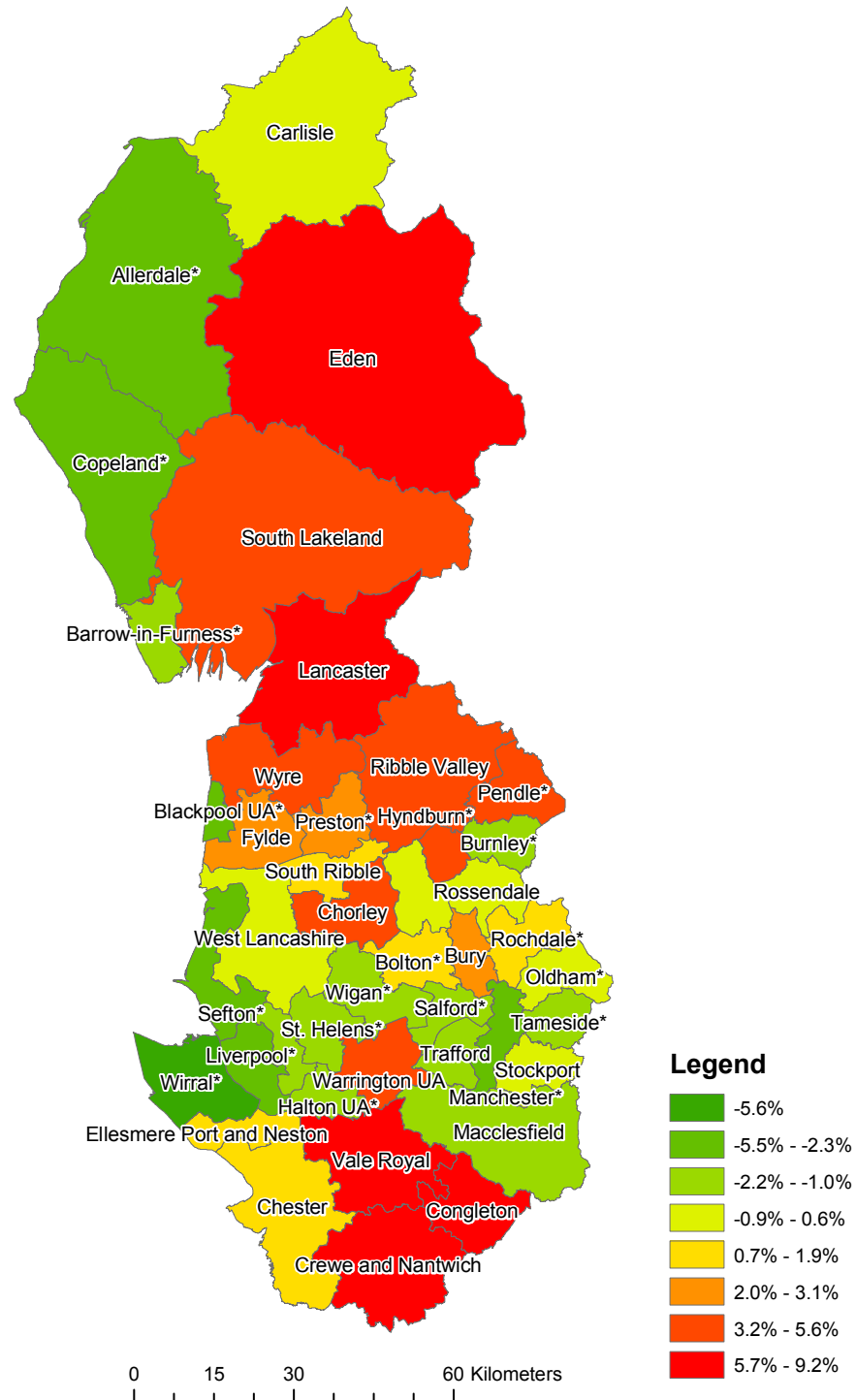


Illustration 3

Rural areas – conflicts between counter-urbanization and protection of the countryside character

Regional plans and planning policies in the two cases are quite similar regarding the general aim of protecting green fields or green belts and the countryside against residential development. Yet in practice the local authorities in Germany have a much stronger position in the planning process. Also local opposition against new residential development tends to be much more limited in German rural areas, which partly reflects the different attitude towards the countryside. The following two maps illustrate the result of this difference on the housing market. On the left one can see the average price per postcode sector paid for a semi-detached house in the North-West in 2003. The right map from the most recent Grundstücksmarktbericht NRW shows the price structure on county-level in North-Rhine Westphalia. Lower level data for the housing market is not available here and some counties did not report any data.

In the North-West many urban areas have significantly lower values than some of the rural areas. Exceptions are some southern parts of Greater Manchester and parts of Liverpool. Housing prices in many rural areas tend to be much higher, especially in the central parts of Cumbria in the North, rural parts of Lancashire and parts of Cheshire in the South. As the planning system is quite restrictive regarding new developments in rural areas the effect are relatively high prices. The situation in North-Rhine Westphalia is different. The prices for semi-detached properties are consistently lower in most rural areas than in urban areas. Exceptions to this general pattern are some northern parts of the Ruhr with a relatively low price level even in urban areas.

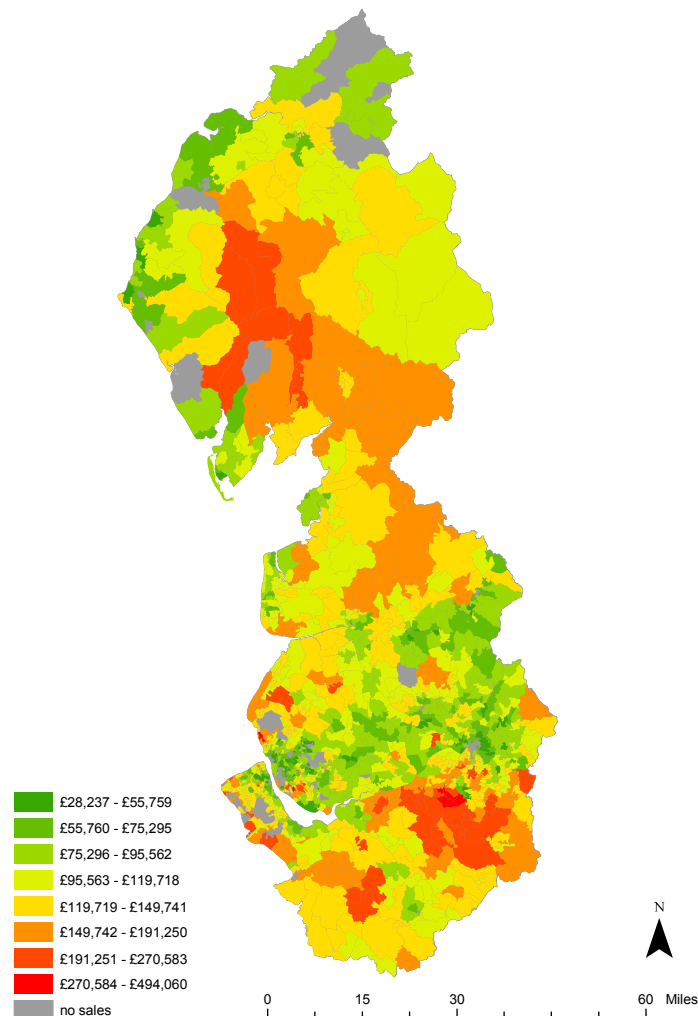


Illustration 4: average price for semi-detached house per postcode sector in 2003
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Kaufpreise neu errichteter Reihenendhäuser und Doppelhaushälften

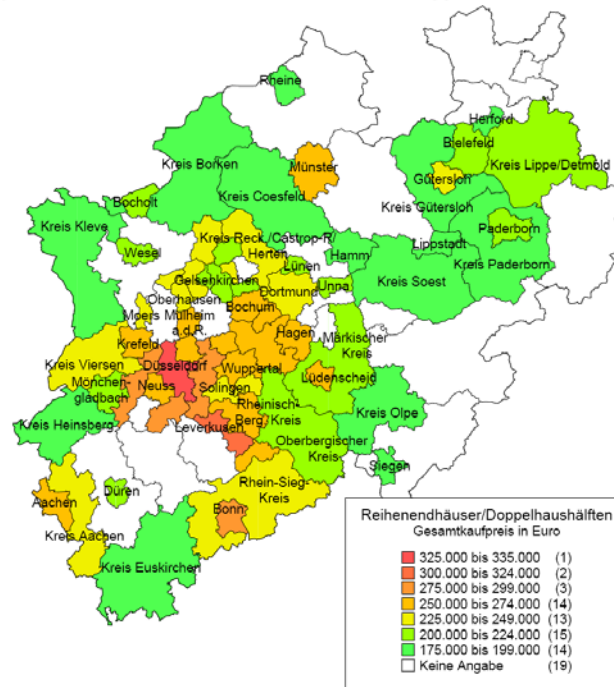


Illustration 5: Average price of semi-detached property/ end of row terrace in 2004, source: Grundstücksmarktbericht NRW 2005, page 71

Commuting structures

If there is a continuing growth of population in some rural areas and if urban areas continue to loose population one might ask what consequences this has for the economic base of rural areas. Do the new residents mainly use rural areas for housing and still commute to urban areas? Or are there employment opportunities nearby their new place of residence? The following two maps illustrate the shares of long-distance commuting in both regions. The map on the left was taken from the Raumordnungsbericht 2000. It is based on data from 1996 and shows the share of the population commuting for more than 25 km. The map on the left is based on data from the Census 2001. Here the threshold of 20 km was used. Both regions have some areas with a high share of long-distance commuting. But in general the share of long-distance commuting is much lower than in other regions both in England and in Germany. Partly this might be explained by the polycentric structure of both regions. But one reason might also be that around economically less successful city regions many employment opportunities are located in the wider city region and inside the rural areas.

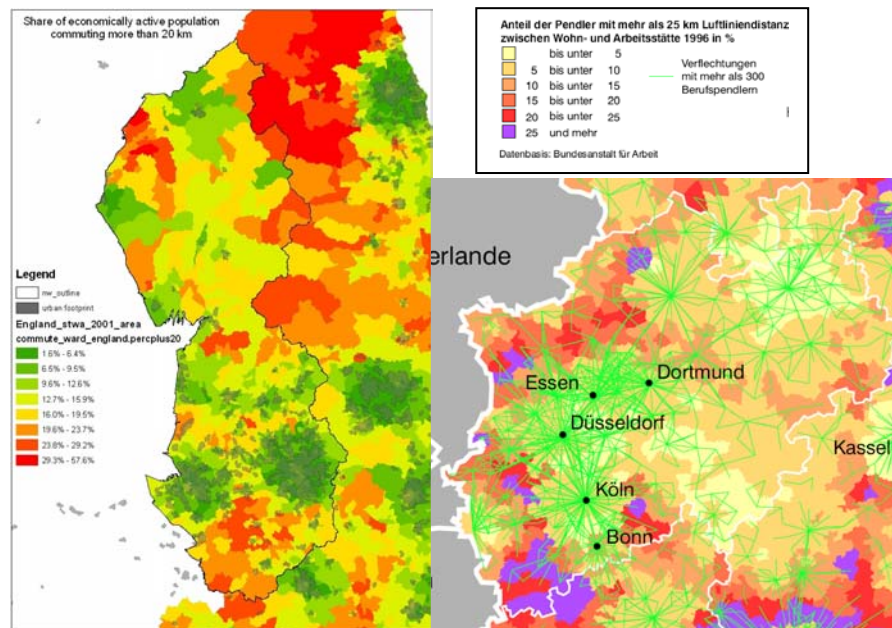


Illustration 6: left map – share of economically active population commuting more than 20 km, based on Census 2001; right map – share of economically active population commuting more than 25 km in 1996, taken from Raumordnungsbericht 2000

Conclusion

Many rural areas went through a significant change in recent decades. Processes of counter-urbanization and out-migration led to significant population growth in many rural districts. While in many economically successful city regions the process of a decreasing population can be compensated by new in-migration into the core cities, this might be difficult to achieve in the two cases discussed in this paper. While in successful city regions many rural areas depend economically on the city as a place to provide work, in the two cases discussed here processes of detachment between rural and urban areas can be observed. The larger cities not only lost their role of being a place of residence. They might also increasingly lose their role as an economic centre for the wider regions. Rural areas might increasingly be chosen as a location of export based businesses that can operate without the support of nearby cities.

For the larger cities this poses the question to redefine their role in a regional context beyond being the primary location of business activity. This might be easier to achieve for the historical cores of the conurbation but more difficult for the areas on the fringe of the conurbation that are facing population loss.

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