

## **Extended Abstract**

### **A place-based approach to population sustainability: Internal migration in rural Scotland**

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Scholars and policy analysts have long been preoccupied with the relationship between population change and various aspects of economic, social and environmental sustainability (Daily and Ehrlich, 1994; Hummel et al., 2013). The foci of these concerns have been debates around (a) whether population growth rates (largely in the so-called Global South) are unsustainably high in environmental terms (Bartlett, 2006) and (b) whether the shift towards ageing populations (currently mainly in the Global North) is unsustainable in economic terms (Valkonen and Barslund, 2019). Whilst polemics about overpopulation have gained popular currency, they have nonetheless been criticised for deflecting responsibility for the environmental damage created by economic systems in the global north to the supposed ill of higher fertility levels in the global south (Fletcher et al., 2014; Okyere-Manu, 2016). Another oft neglected point in debates about unsustainable demographic growth is that global rates of population increase are already declining and are set to plateau by the end of the current century. The latest United Nations (2019) estimates put peak population at nearly 11 billion by 2100, whilst some demographic experts suggest that population will peak even earlier than that and at a much lower level (Nature, 2021).

In the longer term, therefore, the concerns surrounding the sustainability of population ageing that are currently facing higher income countries will become ever more prominent at the global scale (Lutz et al., 2008). Indeed, the Lancet (Vollset et al., 2020) controversially has recently proclaimed a largely universal shift towards falling fertility rates and ageing populations, and warned of the attendant economic, social, environmental, and geopolitical consequences of such a shift. It is for these reasons that this analysis focuses on population sustainability in the context of concerns around population ageing and/or decline. This is a fundamental shift which is already underway or will occur in most countries in the relatively near future. The current evidence base is centred on the fiscal and other economic implications of these changes (Bloom et al., 2010; Kotschy and Sunde, 2018) and many states have consequently already implemented policies in response to this or will have to do so soon (United Nations, 2020). Population sustainability in this context is usually defined in terms of population size and structure and assessed in statistical terms and at the macro, national scale.

This study takes a place-based approach and focuses on Scotland, a country which is facing these challenges and which has tried to enact policy measures in response to them. The contribution of this research is that it involves in-depth qualitative work with stakeholders ‘on the ground’ in a specific region in order to elucidate the nature and implications of demographic and economic change in shaping the sustainability of places in population terms. Of particular interest is the potential role of internal migration in exacerbating or easing concerns around population sustainability.

An important prompt for this research was the recent publication of the Scottish Government’s policy paper *A Scotland for the Future* (2021), which highlighted the significant demographic challenges that Scotland faces and proposed a series of responses to them. Key demographic concerns are slowing population growth and an ageing population and a reliance on immigration for demographic stability and growth. Whilst a national challenge, these demographic issues are particularly acute in some parts of the country (see *National Records of Scotland, 2020* for detailed account of Scotland’s demography). This analysis focuses on Fife, Dumfries and Galloway and Argyll and Bute as these regions typify the demographic challenges that Scotland, and many other countries, face. Importantly, the Scottish Government emphasises their pledge to take ‘a place-based approach to demography’ (2021, 8) in order to strive towards geographically sensitive thinking and equitable decision making in relation to policy arenas such as regional economic development, housing supply, transport infrastructure and public services. The policy also provides a relatively wide ranging, qualitative definition of population sustainability and specifies four policy areas which are essential to achieving it. A contribution of this research is that it interrogates local stakeholders about their interpretations of demographic challenges and sustainability and the extent to which they believe these ‘fit’ with those depicted in the national plan for Scotland. It also assesses the role of internal migration in the dynamics of population sustainability, specifically accounting for emerging covid-19 induced changes in working practices and associated residential preferences.

The findings suggest that the on-the-ground realities of population sustainability are nuanced and complex. Paucities in the supply of housing are a particular challenge, as are significant inequalities in purchasing power within rural housing markets. Changes in residential preferences associated with the covid-19 pandemic have accelerated some of these issues. As such, there is scope for greater attention to the diversity and complexities of population and economic change at the sub-national scale in broader academic conceptualisations of and

policy responses to the increasingly pressing issue of population sustainability. An obvious but often overlooked lesson in this respect is that 'balance' is indeed a critical component of population sustainability, but that this involves much more than straightforward considerations of the age and sex structures of populations. In this sense, it is important to broaden the terms of the debate surrounding population sustainability beyond concerns with the working age population relative to retirees and encouraging incomers (via internal and international migration) into areas. Significant and entrenched inequalities between and within generations (of which housing wealth is a major component) within Scotland and elsewhere arguably pose as much of a threat to population sustainability as the simple ageing of the population. Many of those of working age are constrained in their ability to remain within or move to areas facing demographic challenges by being priced out of the housing market by remote workers, retirees and second homeowners. These processes in turn further distort the age and socio-economic balance of places, since the services and amenities that are geared towards families and younger people become untenable. For a place to be sustainable in population terms, it therefore needs to be possible for younger residents and those with fewer financial resources at their disposal to be able to afford to live there. Addressing this issue involves significant practical and political difficulties, not least the thorny issue of how the concentration of wealth in particular places and higher socio-economic groups (including many retirees) can be more fairly distributed amongst the population and across the country.