

---

# Collective Grassroots Empowerment in the Quest for Alternative Economic Practices: The Case of the Shrinkage City of Ferrol (Spain)

Mikel Agirre\*<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Université de Perpignan (UPVD) – Université de Perignan Via Domitia – France

<sup>2</sup>Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (UPV / EHU) – Spain

## Abstract

Marked by lasting processes of demographic decline and socioeconomic unrest resulting from a durable crisis (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012), shrinking cities have noted a significant increase during the latest decades (Haase et al. 2013). Shrinking cities draw a growing attention from researchers, practitioners and decision-makers (Bernt et al. 2014). Acknowledging that shrinkage cities are the result of multiple processes coming together in specific ways (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2016), the forces of globalization that prompted and followed the collapse of the fordist model fostered the increase of socio-spatial inequalities propelling the proliferation of shrinking cities as peripheralized spaces in the neoliberal capitalist era (Roth 2016). Considering shrinkage as an anomaly, traditional policy approaches have tried to set up urban and economic strategies tending to confront shrinkage in order to achieve growth dynamics (Bucek & Bleha 2013). Hence, authorities have usually embraced neoliberal strategies focusing on city image and attraction of investment to gain in competitiveness and support re-growth (Béal et al. 2010). Even among the cities having accepted their reality of shrinkage, neoliberal rightsizing and smart-shrinkage strategies have been widely implemented (Hollander & Nemeth 2011). Albeit, the outbreak of the 2008 crisis demonstrates the fragility and insufficiency of growth models to tackle the most imperative challenges associated to shrinkage (Audirac 2009).

However, the crisis has triggered a recrudescence of the European neoliberal switch, leading to increasing inequalities (Petmesidou & Guillén 2014) related to the dramatic erosion of labor and social conditions (Turcu et al. 2015). Cities hold a privileged place on the unfolding of the neoliberal privatization and austerity turn (Donald et al. 2014). Still, the rising social awareness on the noxious effects of neoliberalization processes has fueled the dawning of intense contestation movements (Birch & Mykhnenko 2010) with cities playing a central role in the germination of alternatives aiming at confronting the prevalent model to reconquer socio-spatial justice (Janoschka 2011).

In this context, a growing amount of scholars stresses that shrinking cities emerge as a privileged arena for the experimentation of urban and economic alternatives to mainstream models (Hackworth 2014), highlighting as alternative those practices seeking to reduce socioeconomic injustice through citizens' locally driven bottom-up initiatives focused on meeting the needs of the most deprived people (Rousseau & Béal 2015). Although discussed concerning their transformative nature and impact, social and solidarity based economy (SSE)

---

\*Speaker

initiatives, stem as one of the most notable alternatives to the dominant economic model (Raffaelli 2016). So, despite the potential risk of succumbing to market economy co-optation, SSE initiatives are commonly grassroots driven, aiming at serving the community and fueled by non-profit oriented goals (Fraisie 2010).

Drawing on the research possibilities provided by the Spanish shrinking city of Ferrol, the study aims at exploring to what extent does urban shrinking favor the blossom of progressive alternatives to the dominant neoliberal models, investigating as well the role of community's direct involvement in the quest for these alternatives. To that end, the study mobilizes semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and documentary research as principal data collection methods, harnessing the interpretative advantages provided by thematic analysis as regards data treatment (Blanchet and Gotman 2007). Since its foundation in the 18th century, the development of Ferrol has always been dependent on the military function and the shipbuilding industry linked to it (Precedo 1995). Accordingly, the city has always featured a clear sociopolitical division between a progressist working-class and a conservative military elite (Cardesín 2004). As a result, the city presents a manifestly unstable political framework, displaying as well fluctuant periods of affluence and decay related to different economic cycles (Cardesín 2000). In this regard, the global economic restructuring and the national political transformations occurred during the late 70s pushed Ferrol towards an unprecedented reality of urban shrinkage (Precedo 1995), magnified with the crash of the latter financial crisis.

Given this background, a wide variety of social movements, associations and individuals came together in 2011 to celebrate a local social forum adhering to the principles of the world social forum. Participants coming from the entire urban agglomeration agreed on organizing collectively in the quest for alternatives to the precarious socioeconomic conditions imposed by the neoliberal turn adopted to tackle the effects of the industrial crisis first and the financial one then. The first result of the collectivization of the grassroots impulsion was the creation of a wide social network, leading to the emergence of further specific initiatives such as the Cooperative *Arméria*. The cooperative spurred to the creation of collective urban gardens and a bartering store in a deprived neighborhood opening new development possibilities through SSE.

The experience reveals that shrinking cities may give rise to innovative actions that although limited in their transformative scope, may at least interfere into general pro-growth urban models (Béal et al. 2016). Hereof, the study shows the potential of urban shrinkage as a lever for the emergence of alternative initiatives to mainstream entrepreneurial practices (Coppola 2014), highlighting that the upscaling and collectivization of grassroots willingness are crucial to pave the way for more progressive alternatives (Soja 2010).

**Keywords:** Shrinking cities, Neoliberal policy, Collective movements, Urban alternatives, Social and solidary based economy