

## Chapter 14

# Levels of Social Disparity in a Shrinking Setting: A Case of Shrinking Cities of Khuzestan Province, Iran

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### ABSTRACT

*With increasing prevalence, severity, persistence, and geographical incidence, cities have faced shrinkage during the past half century. Urban planners have paid special attention to shrinking cities. The concept of urban shrinkage has turned into a fixed base of research for many urban studies. While urban planning debates of recent years have mainly focused on the economic and environmental dimensions of shrinking cities, social dimensions are usually neglected despite their importance. This chapter aims at the socio-spatial differences and the relationship between the negative rate of population growth and the level of social development in the shrinking cities of Khuzestan province as an oil-rich province in Iran. The results show that there are great differences among the shrinking cities in terms of social factors, and surprisingly, the cities that have experienced more shrinkage have more social development.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, some cities in developing countries have faced urban shrinkage. Urban shrinkage is not only a demographic process but also a phenomenon that has economic, social and spatial dimensions (Oswalt, 2005). In other words, shrinking cities have experienced a dramatic decline not only in their population but also in their economic and social bases (Habitat, 2008; Ubarevičienė *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, in these countries, amidst a growing concern about increasing disparity, the spatial dimensions of disparity have begun to attract considerable interest in policy making. In China, Mexico, Iran, India, and South Africa, as well as most other developing and transition economies, it is felt that spatial and regional disparity is on the rise (Kanbur & Venables, 2005).

In addition, little attention has been paid to shrinking cities in the developing world, and studies in this area have only been carried out in small numbers. In this context, a UN-HABITAT analysis of 1,408 cities in the developing world showed that 143 cities, or 10.2 per cent of the sample, experienced a reduction in population (i.e., a negative growth rate) between 1990 and 2000 (Habitat, 2008). The study identified four reasons for shrinking of cities in developing countries. They included “suburbanization and the growth of nucleations”, “economic decline”, “selective decline”, and “reclassification of cities”. In another study, Moraes (2012) argued that, in Brazil and many developing countries, socio-economic disparity can explain the population mobility between cities. Ubarevičienė *et al.* (2012) had an analysis of the spatial dimension of population decline at the national level in Lithuania. They found that the population had dropped in most areas, including the main cities, but increased in the regions surrounding these cities. Also, population composition and investment were found to be the most important causes of decline in Lithuania.

Although there is an observable increase of socio-economic polarization in most countries, the debate on social disparities has lost its former central position in sociology (Manderscheid, 2009). Some studies have noted the growing problem of disparity amongst individuals and across regions (Faguet & Shami, 2008). As Wei (1999) emphasizes, in developing countries, disparity is an important aspect of academic inquiry and is one of the major concerns facing governments. One can identify various causes for spatial disparity in these countries. They are colonialism, the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism, globalization, wrong policies of governments, etc. (Kanbur *et al.*, 2005; Zhang & Kanbur, 2005; Anderson, 2005; Logan, 1972). However, it is necessary to pay specific attention to spatial disparities in shrinking cities. Fol (2012) believes that, in France as well as in other countries, urban shrinkage has led to growing socio-spatial disparities. In this regard, he states that, with a fall in investment, the number of jobs decreases and unemployment rises. As a result, the most vulnerable segments of the population remain while young people migrate. Indeed, this increases socio-spatial inequalities on the urban region scale.

Over the past decades, despite a relatively strong population growth at the national level, urban shrinkage has occurred silently in Khuzestan province of Iran. Khuzestan has been faced with drastic population changes due to influences of different political, economic, social and cultural factors, the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq in this region, and particularly the boost in industrial and agricultural infrastructures (Beik-Mohamadi, Mokhtari-Malek Abadi, 2002). Certainly, the growth and decline of urban areas change not only the physical environment but also the social environment in those areas (Grant, 2010). Therefore, it seems that the shrinking cities of Khuzestan province are not at the same level of social development, and the level of social development is according to their population negative growth rate.

Since social factors play a major part in shrinking cities and explain a large variety of urban population movements, the present study focuses on the socio-spatial disparities and the relationship between the

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