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When the tap stays dry: water networks in eastern Germany

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Abstract

The article discusses problems of drinking water supply and wastewater disposal in shrinking cities. Taking the situation in eastern Germany as an example, technical, economic and institutional impacts of population losses and deindustrialisation on water-related infrastructures are examined. It is argued that these lead to “cold spots” of infrastructure provision in which the modernist ideal of infrastructure provision is increasingly under pressure.

Keywords:

water supply

wastewater disposal

demographic change

deindustrialisation

shrinkage

Eastern Germany

Notes

The most important reasons for the decrease of private water demand are the introduction of a new tariff system after 1990, the instalment of water-saving household appurtenances and the rehabilitation of leaky pipes. Furthermore, many water consuming industries introduced their own water supply system and water recycling.

The term “privatisation” has to be applied with care. Full marketisation of water is rare and the usual cases have always been forms of partnership between the public and the private sector. Therefore, we use the term “privatisation” not in a narrow sense which would only include a complete transfer of formerly public assets to the market, but rather as any form where control over water networks is shifted from the public to the private sector. Examples for this shift then include concessions, the sale of shares of public companies, the introduction of market mechanisms in decision-making, etc.

As a matter of fact, however, there are also examples of privatisations in small rural municipalities in shrinking regions. This can mainly be attributed to the attempts of private water companies to break into a market that is still dominated by public enterprises (Naumann [2008](#)).

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