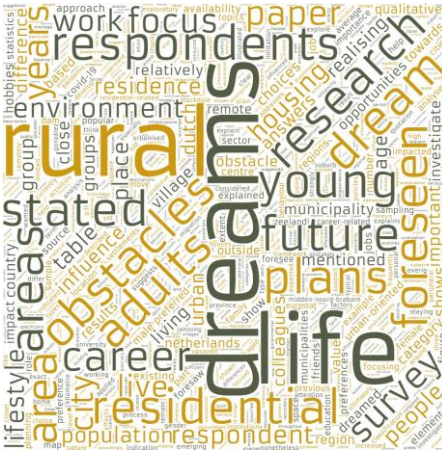
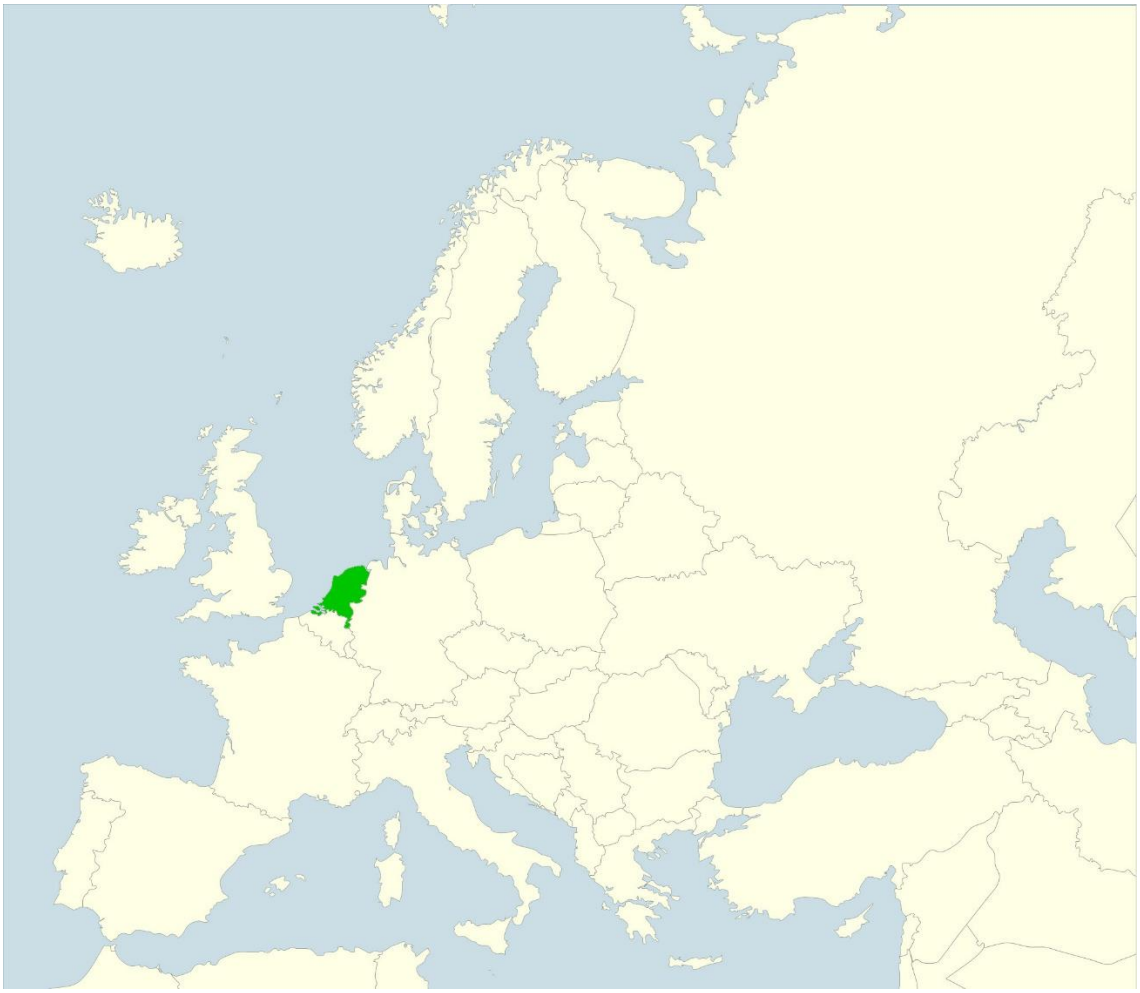
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RURAL RESIDENCE: DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE AND FORESEEN OBSTACLES BY YOUNG ADULTS FROM THE NETHERLANDS

Maarten C. J. Koreman[1]





[1] Maarten C. J. Koreman, MSc. MA. Department Management in the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands, ORCID: 0000-0002-8142-1143, e-mail: M.C.J.Koreman@tudelft.nl

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Abstract: This paper examines the dreams for the future of young adults in Midden-Noord-Brabant and Zeeland, the Netherlands. Through 274 qualitative surveys and focus groups with 12 participants, it explores their dreams for the future, the obstacles they foresee in realising these dreams, and the influence of these obstacles on their stated life plans. The findings reveal a preference for areas outside settlements in residential dreams. Limited housing and career opportunities are identified as foreseen obstacles. These obstacles shape participants' stated life plans, which become more urban-oriented. Removing these obstacles can facilitate the realisation of rural residential dreams and promote rural areas as attractive areas to settle for new generations.

Keywords: young adults; dreams for the future; life plans; rural-urban migration; rural housing

Abstract: Dit artikel richt zich op toekomstdromen van jongvolwassenen. Het rapporteert exploratief onderzoek in twee Nederlandse regio's: Midden-Noord-Brabant en Zeeland. 274 kwalitatieve enquêtes geven inzicht in toekomstdromen en voorziene obstakels in het realiseren hiervan. Focusgroepen met 12 respondenten wijzen op de invloed van voorziene obstakels op de levensplannen van jongvolwassenen. De resultaten wijzen op de populariteit van buitengebieden. Het tekort aan huizen en carrièremogelijkheden in rurale gebieden vormen voorziene obstakels. Respondenten maken meer stadsgerichte levensplannen vanwege deze obstakels. Het wegnemen van voorziene obstakels kan helpen om rurale toekomstdromen te realiseren en rurale gebieden aantrekkelijker te maken voor jongvolwassenen.

Sleutelwoorden: jongvolwassenen; toekomstdromen; levensplannen; platteland-stad migratie; ruraal wonen

Highlights

- Many young Dutch adults dream of living in rural areas and outside settlements.
- The lack of available housing in rural areas is the most foreseen obstacle.
- The lack of career opportunities in rural areas is the second-most foreseen obstacle.
- Foreseen obstacles to rural futures make young adults' life plans more urban-oriented.

1. Introduction

Many rural areas in Europe are losing population to urban areas. Previous research has given attention to why young people make such a move. Career opportunities are most cited (Thissen et al., 2010; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017), whereas lack of available housing (McKee et al., 2017) and policies have also been mentioned (Pinilla & Sáez, 2021). The social and economic future of rural areas relies to a large extent on young people. Nevertheless, once rural populations decline, it becomes difficult to reverse this process and remain attractive and liveable for young adults (Elshof et al., 2014). Therefore, it is essential to understand why young adults might leave or not go to rural areas.

It is difficult to forecast future rural population development. Researchers have used past or current migration patterns to investigate this phenomenon (Coulter & Van Ham, 2013; Stockdale et al., 2013). Other researchers focus on the correlation between stated and revealed residential preferences (Earnhart, 2002; Vasanen, 2012; Hasanzadeh et al., 2019). Such studies show classic rural push and urban pull factors to explain rural-to-urban migration (Gollin et al., 2002; Davis & Henderson, 2003). However, these types of research do not reveal the dreams of the people who move. It remains to be seen if young adults move to urban areas because this fulfils their dreams for the future or because they are not able

to fulfil their dreams in a rural area. Knowledge about their dreams for the future may help to explain how young adults develop their life plans and why they make eventual decisions (Anderson et al., 2005).

There has been attention to the role of dreams for the future in actual migration behaviour. Dreams for the future describe how people ideally see their life in fifteen years. Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) argue that the actual migration behaviour of families and young adults partly relies on their dreams for the future. These dreams can be divided into residential dreams, focusing on accommodation; lifestyle dreams, focusing on hobbies and family aspirations; and career dreams, focusing on work. Therefore, the current desires, preferences, and dreams for young adults' future are significant and can be used, in part, to explore future migration (Kuhmonen et al., 2016).

This can be strengthened by incorporating foreseen obstacles in realising dreams and, hence, the stated life plans of young adults. Foreseen obstacles can be anything that young adults personally foresee as an obstacle in realising their dreams for the future. The stated life plans of young people incorporate the foreseen obstacles and describe where and how someone plans to live in the future. Hence, there can be differences between the dreams for the future of young adults and their stated life plans, which tend to be more realistic (Anderson et al., 2005; Brooks & Everett, 2008; Yuliawati & Ardyan, 2020). Knowledge about the obstacles that may impede the realisation of dreams for the future, and their influence on the stated life plans of young people with a rural residential dream, may add to the knowledge of young adults and their future. This also helps policymakers in rural areas. They can focus on removing foreseen obstacles to reduce the influence of these obstacles on the stated life plans of young adults with a rural residential dream.

This paper explores the dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles of young Dutch adults with both an urban and rural background and how these obstacles influence their stated life plans. The paper addresses the following research questions: *What are the dreams for the future of young Dutch adults? What obstacles do young adults with a rural residential dream foresee in realising these dreams? And how are these foreseen obstacles influencing their stated life plans?*

To investigate the research questions, the paper applied the exploratory survey method of Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) to assess the future residential, lifestyle, and career dreams and foreseen obstacles of 274 survey respondents. These were all young Dutch adults recruited from rural and urban areas. Three focus groups with, in total, twelve survey respondents with a rural residential dream were then held to assess how these foreseen obstacles influenced their stated life plans. During the focus groups, it was explained to participants how the concept of dreams for the future differs from the concept of stated life plans.

2. Literature review

This paper aims to shed light on the dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles, and stated life plans of young Dutch adults. The rest of this section reviews earlier research on these topics and explains the theoretical underpinning of using these concepts.

There is an emerging literature on the future migration behaviour of young adults, with different approaches being used to investigate this. Some scholars use ‘stated’ preferences to estimate where young people want to live in the future (Van Dam et al., 2002; Vasanen, 2012). This can later be compared with actual behaviour, the ‘revealed’ preferences. González and colleagues (2021) investigated what aspects influence whether young people decide to remain in or move away from a rural area. They found that solid mobility opportunities and feelings of belonging predict if young people want to remain. Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016) introduced a new approach to investigate the future migration behaviour of young adults: future dreams. The future dream is an individual micro-future that consists of three elements: residence, lifestyle, and career (Kuhmonen et al., 2016). ‘A future dream connects the personal dreams and intentions to specific possible states of the future toward which one is inclined to navigate.’ (Kuhmonen et al., 2021, p. 11). This paper refers to ‘future dreams’ as ‘dreams for the future’, as it clarifies that this concept describes current dreams for future situations rather than dreams that may appear in the future.

Since this paper uses the dreams for the future approach, it first explains the importance of residence, lifestyle, and career elements. The residential dreams of young adults form an important part of their dreams for the future. If they fulfil their residential dreams, young adults will live in their intended place or environment of residence. Previous research has shown that stated residential preference strongly correlates with residential choice and, therefore, revealed preference (Earnhart, 2002; Vasanen, 2012; Hasanzadeh et al., 2019). This suggests that the residential dreams of young adults correlate with their eventual residential choices. Hence, these residential dreams are an important element of the dreams for the future.

Lifestyle dreams are another important part of the dreams for the future of young adults. Some people have hobbies that tie them to specific residential locations. For others, spending time with family or friends is so important that they will adjust their residential choices accordingly (Rérat, 2014; Cook & Cuervo, 2020). Studies show that lifestyle preferences also impact residential preferences and, ultimately, residential choices (Ærø, 5 2006; Frenkel et al., 2013). This suggests that the lifestyle dreams of young adults have predictive value on their eventual residential choices. Hence, these lifestyle dreams are an important element of the dreams for the future.

Career dreams are an important element in the dreams for the future of young adults as well. A dream to work for the national government in The Hague can hardly be combined with a dream of living in a remote rural area. Career dreams could influence the overall dreams for the future (Kim et al., 2003; Mao & Wang, 2020). This suggests that career dreams are an important element in the dreams for the future of young adults. On the other hand, the increased opportunities to work remotely may slightly diminish the importance of the work location for life plans and eventual residential choices (Davies, 2021). For example, the Covid-19 pandemic led to increased remote work in The Netherlands. Meanwhile, the difference in house prices between cities and less urban areas diminished. However, it is unclear if this latest pattern can be related to the Covid-19 pandemic (PBL, 2021; NVM, 2022). Moreover, since many jobs are always tied to specific geographical locations, the work location has some effect (Althoff et al., 2022). Therefore, young adults' career dreams are an important part of their dreams for the future.

Knowledge about foreseen obstacles in realising dreams can suggest which dreams for the future are also part of the stated life plans of young adults. Obstacles will impact the stated life plans and future residential choices of young adults. People's resources and the constraints they foresee, such as housing availability, career opportunities, and personal circumstances, impact their ultimate migration moves (Van Dam et al., 2002; Jansen, 2020). This suggests the importance of foreseen obstacles in the eventual residential choices of young adults. After all, 'changing preferences and various obstacles may cause future dreams to not become a reality.' (Kuhmonen et al., 2021, p. 11).

However, long before that moment, foreseen obstacles can influence the life plans of young adults. Foreseen obstacles are personal. Housing prices may be a foreseen obstacle for one person and an unforeseen obstacle for someone else. If people foresee too many obstacles in fulfilling their dreams, they may not even pursue them. This will lead to a stated life plan that differs from the dream for the future. Future changes can also influence the eventual choices of young adults regarding the obstacles and dreams they do not foresee yet. However, as these unforeseen obstacles and dreams are yet unknown, they will not influence their stated life plans.

Stated life plans differ from stated preferences and dreams for the future. Van Dam and colleagues (2002) explained how stated preferences for rural living are based on the characteristics of the household and images of the countryside. They represent ideals of future living rather than concrete life plans. Kuhmonen and colleagues (2021, p. 11) explain future dreams as a future towards which people are 'inclined to navigate'. In their stated life plans, on the other hand, respondents consider the foreseen obstacles in realising their dreams for the future. Therefore, their stated life plans are expected to be more realistic than their dreams for the future or their stated preferences.

The extent to which stated life plans have predictive value has been the subject of sociological debate since the 2000s. Anderson and colleagues (2005) have demonstrated that adolescents think ahead about their future and plan accordingly. The life plans of adolescents could predict their future behaviour to

some extent (Anderson et al., 2005). In contrast, Brannen and Nilsen (2007) noted that the life plans of young adults could be ambiguous as they are often subject to recent experiences, and many young people still need to plan for their future life. Unforeseen events in the future, such as economic crises, are likely to impact the realisation of life plans (Brannen & Nilsen, 2007). This critique is relevant for this paper, as the research on which it is based was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, stated life plans do have some predictive value. Brooks and Everett (2008) investigated university graduates. They showed that university graduates are engaged in serious life planning while weighing options and taking responsibility for life choices, which partly depend on their stated life plans. This was confirmed in a more recent study (Yuliawati & Ardyan, 2020). This suggests that the stated life plans of people predict, to some extent, their future residential choices. Although life plans cannot perfectly predict such future behaviour, they show what young adults aim for and suggest what they might do in the future. Moreover, potential differences between dreams for the future and stated life plans show the influence of foreseen obstacles.

The dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles, and stated life plans of young Dutch adults have been explored through the analytical framework shown in Figure 1. The method section will further explain how the research has been conducted.

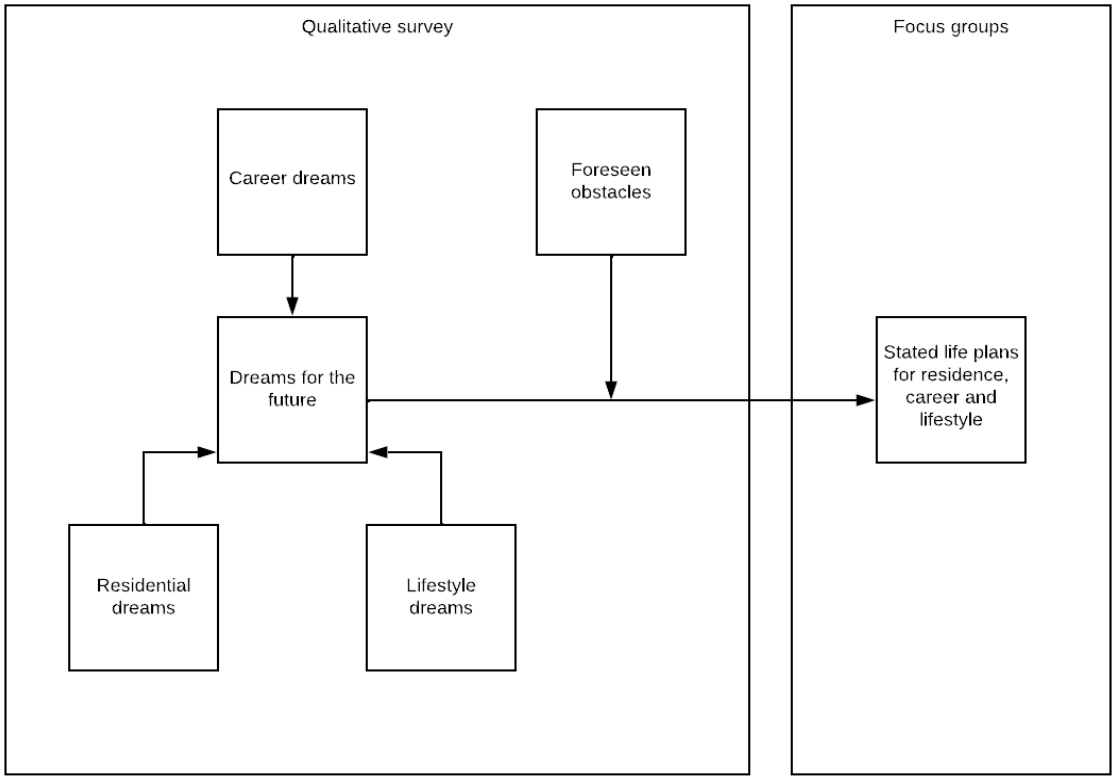


Fig 1. Framework used for analysing dreams for the future, foreseen obstacles and stated life plans. Source: This research

3. Context of the study area and methods

The Netherlands is a strongly urbanised and densely populated country (World Bank, 2022) with a relatively large service sector and a small agricultural sector with decreasing employment opportunities (Thelen, 2019; Koster et al., 2020). Dutch rural areas are always relatively close to urban areas (Eurostat, 2018). Currently, the country has an urgent housing shortage, with young adults facing increasing difficulties in buying or renting suitable housing (Jonkman et al., 2022). In the previous decade, housing prices have soared throughout the country (NVM, 2022). Because of the high population density and multiple spatial claims, there is fierce competition for land in the Netherlands. This can be seen in plans for additional housing and business parks, new infrastructure, more sustainable energy, enlarged nature

areas, and a potential transformation of agriculture towards more organic farming. These plans all require space, which is limited (RLI, 2021).

A qualitative survey was organised to explore the dreams for the future of young Dutch adults and the obstacles they foresaw in realising them. The respondents were surveyed between April and August 2020. Additional focus groups with survey respondents were held in October and November 2020 to explore how these obstacles may influence stated life plans. In the exploratory design of the research, the representativeness of the respondents was not required. Nonetheless, we aimed for a wide variety of dreams to be portrayed, with at least 100 survey respondents from both urban and rural municipalities. This helps to show the existing dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles of a large group of young adults.

The sampling efforts focused on people aged 18–30 in two NUTS-3 regions. These regions were chosen because they reflect the two dominant types of regional urbanity in the Netherlands, according to the Eurostat regional typology, namely Predominantly urban [Midden-Noord-Brabant] and Intermediate [Overig Zeeland] regions (Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat, 2022b). Moreover, Midden-Noord-Brabant and Overig Zeeland are closest to the Dutch average in their respective categories when combining the following parameters: number of inhabitants, population density, population growth, gender balance, median age, fertility, long term GDP-growth, employment level, employment distribution by sector, and level of education (Eurostat, 2022a). The results from these close-to-average regions may also indicate the general situation in the country. Figure 2 shows the location of the regions that were important for this research.

To define urban and rural areas within these regions in the Dutch context, this research uses the classification of Statistics Netherlands based on the degree of urbanisation per municipality (2022a). This classification measures the average density of addresses per municipality. Municipalities with less than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre, classified as not urbanised and hardly urbanised (Statistics Netherlands, 2022a), are considered rural. Municipalities with more than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre, classified as moderately urbanised, strongly urbanised, and extremely urbanised (Statistics Netherlands, 2020a), are considered urban.

During the sampling period, the qualitative survey was disseminated in various ways. In Midden-Noord-Brabant, one municipality in the region [Baarle-Nassau], youth and student groups and a local sports association approached young adults in the age group to participate. In Overig Zeeland, this was done through village councils and social media platforms and the promotion of the survey among students by a secondary vocational education school and a university of applied sciences. In total, 274 respondents participated in the research. Within this group of respondents, the age category of 18–23 years and people living in rural municipalities are overrepresented (see Table 1). This can be explained by the role of educational institutions during the sampling process and the survey topic. Young adults who were less focused on their dreams for the future and those without rural dreams were less likely to have participated. The educational institutions that helped disseminate the survey have a geographical focus beyond the regions where the sampling efforts were focused. This led to a relatively high number of respondents (n=24) from the Predominantly rural region of Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen (Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat, 2022b). The rurality of this region also increased the number of participants from a rural municipality. All the data for this research was collected in Dutch and translated into English by the author of this paper.

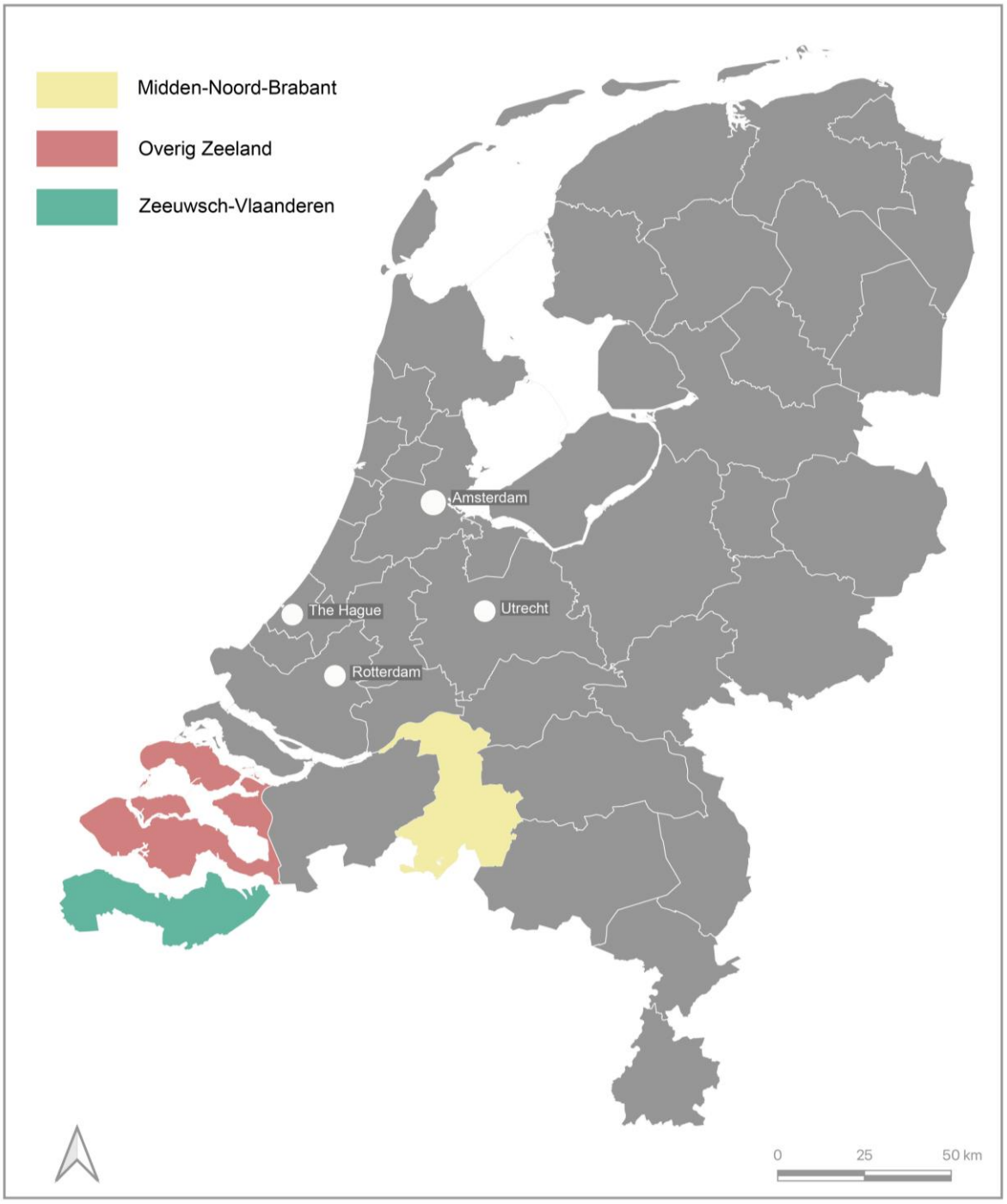


Fig 2. Researched regions. Source: This research

Tab 1. Composition (%) of the sample and the population. Source: This research; Statistics Netherlands (2022b)

Indicator	**Sample**	**Population (18–30 years of age)**
Type of municipality where respondents reside:		
Urban:	39.1 (n=107)	60.7
Rural:	60.9 (n=167)	39.3
Age category:		
18–23 years:	64.2 (n=176)	47.1
24–30 years:	35.8 (n=98)	52.9
Gender:		
Male:	44.2 (n=121)	51.1
Female:	55.8 (n=153)	48.9
Total	100.0 (n=274)	100.0

The survey was based on an earlier survey by Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016). It was disseminated as part of European-scale research into the future of rural areas (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). It first asks respondents for background information, then for them to make a choice between six illustrated and described residential environments: the city centre; a city area outside the centre; a suburb in a city area; a rural area close to a city; a rural village; and a remote rural area (see Figure 3). Respondents selected which area types they were born in, which they were living during their response, and which they dreamed of living in fifteen years when they would be 33–45 years old (Kuhmonen et al., 2021).

The respondents also indicated in which place of residence they dreamed of residing in fifteen years. This helps to explain where precisely the respondents' dreams are located and what meaning they give to the residential environments. It reveals, for example, what type of areas respondents characterise as a 'rural village' or a 'suburb in a city area'. Following the classification between urban and rural municipalities, respondents who dream of residing in a municipality with less than 1,000 addresses per square kilometre are considered to have a 'rural residential dream' (Statistics Netherlands, 2022a). These rural residential dreams received special attention concerning the obstacles that respondents foresaw in realising them and how these foreseen obstacles influenced their stated life plans. Respondents then answered questions describing their residential, work, and lifestyle dreams in fifteen years. In the questions, some explanation was given about what topics are involved in these different dreams for the future (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). This information was collated to form a description of the dreams for the future of young adults, as the analytical framework shows (see Figure 1).



Fig 3. Illustrated and described residential environment. Source: Kuhmonen et al., 2021. It was translated into Dutch by the authors

This research adds two elements to the approach of Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016). First, respondents described the obstacles they foresaw in realising their future residential, career, and lifestyle dreams (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). This helped to understand which part of their dreams for the future might not be considered achievable by young Dutch adults. After describing their dreams for the future, respondents answered the following question: *What obstacles do you foresee in realising these dreams?* Second, respondents were asked to what extent they felt their survey answers were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which dominated the news throughout the survey period (Kuhmonen et al., 2021).

The descriptions of dream futures and foreseen obstacles varied in length. They were analysed using the directed content analysis method, which utilises research data to build on an existing framework (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). The existing framework categorised residential dreams, career dreams, lifestyle dreams, and foreseen obstacles. (Kuhmonen et al., 2016). The content of the dreams and obstacles were analysed for these categories.

To investigate how the foreseen obstacles in realising dreams for the future influence the stated life plans of young adults, three focus groups were organised. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, two focus groups were held online and one face-to-face. Focus groups support the study of how individuals collectively

understand phenomena and construct meaning around them (Wilkinson, 1999). They also help to understand why people make particular choices (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The twelve focus group participants, four per session, were recruited from the survey respondents, who could leave their e-mail addresses if they were interested in further participation. Table 2 shows some more background on the focus group participants. As they mostly lived in rural municipalities, the results of the focus groups say most about the stated life plans of young adults with a rural background.

Tab 2. Composition of the focus groups. Source: This research

Indicator	**Focus group participants**	
Type of municipality where respondents reside: *Urban* *Rural*	 1 11	
Age category: *18–23 years* *24–30 years*	 8 4	
Gender: *Male* *Female*	 5 7	
Level of education: *Secondary* *Tertiary*	 7 5	
Mentioned future professions, open answers	Health sector (n=3) Public sector (n=2) Water sector (n=2) Finance sector (n=1) Environment sector (n=1) Accountant (n=1) Entrepreneur (n=1) Farmer (n=1)	
Total	12	

During the focus groups, which took an hour each, the survey results were discussed with and interpreted by participants, who could also explain their dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles. Consequently, the participants could discuss how they would deal with foreseen obstacles and what this meant for their stated life plans. For example, what choice would they make if they had both a rural residential dream and a career dream that required them to live closer to an urban area? This additional analysis was used to understand how the stated life plans of young adults with a rural residential dream were influenced by their dreams for the future and the obstacles they foresaw in realising them.

The focus group results were also analysed using the directed content analysis method (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). The survey results analysis provided the existing framework. New topics that were raised during the focus groups were also analysed. The result section will first show the results of the qualitative survey: the dreams for the future and the foreseen obstacles. Then, it will show how the foreseen obstacles of focus group participants influenced their stated life plans. If these stated life plans differ from their dreams for the future, young adults make life decisions that do not align with their dreams.

4. Results

4.1 Residential dreams

The respondents generally dreamed of staying within, or close to, their current place of residence. Tables 3, 4 and 5 show multiple categories of respondents and how their indicated preferred place of residence in fifteen years compares to their current place of residence. Respondents often specifically indicated their current place of residence as their dream place of residence in fifteen years [52%]. This percentage

is even higher for male respondents [60%, Table 3] and respondents who live in a rural municipality [57%, Table 5]. Female respondents (see Table 3) and respondents from urban municipalities (see Table 5) are more willing to move to other places. The two age groups in this research have more minor differences in their answers (see Table 4). The results show more interest among young adults in staying within the same area than previous research on young people in peripheral regions in Belgium and the Netherlands suggested (Thissen et al., 2010). This result confirms the suggestion of Stockdale and Haartsen (2018) that there is an emerging trend in rural areas for people to stay.

Tab 3. Indication of preferred place of residence in 15 years Female/Male/Total. Source: This research

Place of residence	Answers per category (female)	%	Answers per category (male)	%	Total answers per category	%
Same as current place of residence	70	46	72	60	142	52
Same municipality	12	8	9	7	21	8
Same province	29	19	10	8	39	14
Same country, other province	15	10	13	11	28	10
Same country, exact place not indicated	8	5	5	4	13	5
Other country	19	12	12	10	31	11
Total	**153**	**100**	**121**	**100**	**274**	**100**

Tab 4. Indication of preferred place of residence in 15 years Age 18–23/Age 24–30/Total. Source: This research

Place of residence	Answers per category (age 18-23)	%	Answers per category (age 24-30)	%	Total answers per category	%
Same as current place of residence	88	50	54	55	142	52
Same municipality	9	5	12	13	21	8
Same province	28	16	11	11	39	14
Same country, other province	22	12	6	6	28	10
Same country, exact place not indicated	8	5	5	5	13	5
Other country	21	12	10	10	31	11
Total	**176**	**100**	**98**	**100**	**274**	**100**

Tab 5. Indication of preferred place of residence in 15 years Urban/Rural municipality/Total. Source: This research

Place of residence	Answers per category (urban)	%	Answers per category (rural)	%	Total answers per category	%
Same as current place of residence	47	44	95	57	142	52
Same municipality	6	5	15	9	21	8
Same province	17	16	22	13	39	14
Same country, other province	18	17	10	6	28	10
Same country, exact place not indicated	4	4	9	5	13	5
Other country	15	14	16	10	31	11
Total	**107**	**100**	**167**	**100**	**274**	**100**

As Table 6 shows, rural areas close to a city seemed popular. Although only a few respondents considered themselves to be currently living in such locations, they appeared relatively often in their dreams for the future. Remote rural areas also appeared relatively often. This shows the popularity of areas outside settlements in dreams for the future. Among respondents, cities only appeared sometimes in their residential dreams. There are, however, some differences between categories of respondents. As Table 7 shows, male respondents are more oriented towards remote rural areas and rural villages than their female counterparts, who are more oriented towards rural areas close to a city. As Table 8 shows, respondents in the age group between 24 and 30 years old are more oriented towards remote rural areas and rural villages than their counterparts between 18 and 23 years old, who are more oriented towards rural areas close to a city and city areas.

Tab 6. Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, all respondents. Source: This research

Residential environment	**Current residential environment**	**Preferred residential environment in 15 years**	**Difference in %**
Remote rural area	31	50	+61%
Rural village	146	87	-40%
Rural area close to a city	8	74	+825%
Suburb in a city area	19	23	+21%
City area, outside the city centre	50	28	-44%
City centre	20	12	-40%
Total	**274**	**274**	**+0%**

Tab 7. Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, female/male. Source: This research

Residential environment	**Current residential environment (female)**	**Preferred residential environment in 15 years (female)**	**Difference in % (female)**	**Current residential environment (male)**	**Preferred residential environment in 15 years (male)**	**Difference in % (male)**
Remote rural area	16	22	+38%	15	28	+87%
Rural village	78	41	-47%	68	46	-32%
Rural area close to a city	4	52	+1200%	4	22	+450%
Suburb in a city area	11	11	+0%	8	12	+50%
City area, outside the city centre	34	21	-38%	16	7	-56%
City centre	10	6	-40%	10	6	-40%
Total	**153**	**153**	**+0%**	**121**	**121**	**+0%**

Tab 8. Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, age 18–23/age 24–30. Source: This research

Residential environment	Current residential environment (age 18-23)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (age 18-23)	Difference in % (age 18-23)	Current residential environment (age 24-30)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (age 24-30)	Difference in % (age 24-30)
Remote rural area	23	32	+39%	8	18	+125%
Rural village	94	48	-49%	52	39	-25%
Rural area close to a city	4	49	+1125%	4	25	+525%
Suburb in a city area	15	18	+20%	4	5	+25%
City area, outside the city centre	29	20	-31%	21	8	-62%
City centre	11	9	-18%	9	3	-67%
Total	**176**	**176**	**+0%**	**98**	**98**	**+0%**

Table 9 shows the differences in preferred residential environments in fifteen years between respondents who live in urban and rural municipalities. Interestingly, more respondents who live in urban environments prefer rural environments than vice versa. Areas outside settlements are popular among both groups of respondents. It is important to note here that these results are not representative and reflect small groups of respondents. Nonetheless, their dreams of the future have relevance. Therefore, the rest of this article focuses on the qualitative content of the dreams of the future.

Tab 9. Current and preferred residential environment in 15 years, urban/rural municipality. Source: This research

Residential environment	Current residential environment (urban)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (urban)	Difference in % (urban)	Current residential environment (rural)	Preferred residential environment in 15 years (rural)	Difference in % (rural)
Remote rural area	2	10	+400%	29	40	+38%
Rural village	19	12	-37%	127	75	-41%
Rural area close to a city	3	41	+1267%	5	33	+560%
Suburb in a city area	18	15	-17%	1	8	+700%
City area, outside the city centre	47	21	-55%	3	7	+133%
City centre	18	8	-56%	2	4	+100%
Total	**107**	**107**	**+0%**	**167**	**167**	**+0%**

This paper emphasises future rural residential dreams. Within that category of dreams, living space, nature, and quietness were the most critical factors. This can be seen in the most frequently mentioned words in the residential dream descriptions, such as ‘restful’, ‘detached house’, ‘farm’, ‘garden’, and ‘space’. This also shows that rural residential dreams, to a certain extent, resemble elements of the ‘Dutch rural idyll’ described by Van Dam and colleagues (2002). Young adults also dreamed of living outside settlements in spacious buildings with private land. Furthermore, respondents tended to mention a specific rural village or area where they dreamed of living. They then explained why it was unique and precisely how they dreamed of living. The following quotations represent two typical rural dreams:

"In a village, but with sufficient amenities like a supermarket...Hopefully, lots of young families…The area is green...My ideal home is a rural farmhouse that has been preserved and offers lots of space and peace.'' – Survey respondent.

''Preferably on the outskirts of the village with large garden and barn, so that we live spatially but are quickly at the amenities in the village.'' – Survey respondent.

4.2 Lifestyle dreams

In the lifestyle dreams of respondents, there was a clear focus on leisure activities. Many respondents described their hobbies as important elements of their dreamed future lifestyle. There was also much focus on family and friends. This can be seen in the most frequently mentioned words in the lifestyle dream descriptions: 'hobby', 'family', 'friends', 'sport', and 'social'. Hence, having a family, specifically children, is an explicit element of the lifestyle dream. In many dreams, the focus on hobbies, family, and friends coincided with a specified residential dream. Respondents who mentioned family and friends in their lifestyle dreams generally also dreamed of living close to them. Moreover, some hobbies were mainly mentioned because of their social aspect or required a specific location. This also led to residential dreams being part of the lifestyle dreams description. This typical connection between lifestyle dreams and residential dreams is illustrated in the following two quotations:

"…My friends are an important aspect as well. I have many friends in this village, and we always have fun. That is why I want to stay close.'' – Survey respondent.

'' I hope to do water sports and have the school and sufficient activities for the children nearby. Think of playgrounds and the opportunity to perform sports or hobbies in the village.'' – Survey respondent.

4.3 Career dreams

The career dreams of respondents with a rural residential dream varied. Some career dreams focused on the same area as the residential dream. Respondents who wanted to live and work on a farm are a good example. The following quotation shows a good example:

''I would like to be a dairy farmer. I am active in the agricultural sector now and in the future.'' – Survey respondent.

However, some career dreams focused on jobs that are traditionally located in urban areas. For example, jobs in management, marketing, and consultancy were mentioned. The public sector was also popular. This sector geographically varies between the more urban-centred national government, provincial institutions, and locally organised municipalities. Jobs in health and education, which also appeared and tend to be more locally organised, are also part of the public sector. Working in the latter examples was easier to combine with a rural residential dream. There was also a group of respondents who wanted to become entrepreneurs. As this involves more independence, this ambition may ease the combination of a rural residential and an urban career context. The most frequently mentioned words in the career dream descriptions were: 'salary', 'enjoying work', 'nice job', and 'independence'. This shows that most respondents dreamed of having a job they enjoy, which leads to a good income. The following quotation represents this well:

"A job at a governmental organisation… A good salary and nice colleagues are most important.'' – Survey respondent.

The combination of residential, lifestyle, and career dreams leads to a specific dream for the future, which varies for each person. For some respondents with a rural residential dream, their ambition for a local career and a lifestyle in which their current friends are important led to forming a clear dream for the future. For other respondents with a rural residential dream, more urban-oriented career dreams, or particular lifestyle dreams, led to a locational conflict arising within their dream for the future. This also appeared to be relevant to the foreseen obstacles.

4.4 Foreseen obstacles

The lack of career opportunities in rural areas was considered an obstacle to realising dreams for the future. Some respondents mentioned that the lack of available jobs in their sector in the rural area where they dreamed of living made it hard for them to realise their residential dreams. This applied especially to respondents with a career dream likely to be situated in a more urban context. Other respondents from this group viewed the travel time between the area of their residential dream and the probable location of their career dream as an obstacle. In Zeeland, some respondents also mentioned the lack of opportunities to study and future career development as an obstacle. Career-related obstacles appeared more in the more peripheral region of Zeeland than in the more central region of Midden-Noord-Brabant. This confirms the popularity of rural areas close to cities as places where rural residential dreams and urban career dreams can be combined (Kuhmonen et al., 2016; Auclair & Vanoni, 2017; González et al., 2021). The following quotation shows an example of a respondent with a rural residential dream who foresaw career-related obstacles impeding the realisation of this dream:

"There is currently no work in my sector in Zeeland. This is sad because now I am almost forced to live elsewhere." – Survey respondent.

The relatively urban-oriented career dreams suggested that career-related obstacles in realising rural residential dreams were most prevalent. However, almost every respondent foresaw obtaining a house as an obstacle. The residential-related obstacles were by far the most critical that young adults foresaw in realising their rural residential dream. Residential-related obstacles centred around two issues. First and foremost, respondents mentioned housing availability in rural areas. They pointed to a need for more houses being built and planning policies that prioritised building in urban areas over building in and around rural villages. Second, the high costs of housing were mentioned. Although this problem was mentioned more often by young adults with an urban residential dream, those with a rural residential dream also saw it as problematic. Combining the availability and cost issues, respondents mentioned the lack of variety in the housing offer. They foresaw a need for smaller, affordable and rental houses in rural areas. The following quotations show a typical example of the obstacles foreseen by respondents with a rural residential dream:

"Whether it is to buy or to rent, there are no houses available in our village, or they are too expensive for a starter in the housing market." – Survey respondent.

''…the shortage of "affordable" housing is an obstacle. This is already a problem, but if nothing is done about it within now and 15 years, many young people will be obliged to leave this area.'' – Survey respondent.

Respondents were also asked to what extent they thought that Covid-19 had impacted their answers. This had no significant impact and the explanation of respondents showed that they could think beyond the pandemic's effects. The following quotation represents this well:

''I assume that the effects of corona will no longer be felt in 2035, so I have not factored them into my answers.'' – Survey respondent.

4.5 Stated life plans

The focus groups explored the influence of foreseen obstacles on stated life plans. Focus group participants explained that they would try to achieve their future residential dreams but adjust their residential choices if obstacles were insurmountable. If a dilemma between career and residential dreams existed, most participants preferred to pursue their career dreams. These career dreams were generally more urban-oriented than residential dreams. Therefore, some participants with a rural residential dream would only pursue this dream once career-related obstacles were removed. This becomes clear in the following quotation:

"In the end, I would opt for my dream job… I prefer to commute from my village. But if my work is too far away for that, I would leave this area.'' – Focus group participant.

More urgently, some participants explained that they were planning to look for housing in urban areas if no more houses became available in the location of their rural residential dream. Some explained that they now live with their parents but that if suitable housing does not become available, they will ultimately feel forced to leave their rural area and move to an urban area. Participants also explained that many of their friends wanted to stay in the same place of residence. If this was not possible, they might move further away than just another town nearby. This result is important since residential issues were the most foreseen obstacle, and young adults are at a life stage where moving houses is likely in the upcoming fifteen years (Nivalainen, 2004). The following quotation explains this position well:

"If I can't find a home in this area, 'I will just go to the big city. Surely something can be found there.'' – Focus group participant.

Participants argued that they changed their life plans once young adults left an area and were less likely to return. This was because they would build a life elsewhere. Participants explained that the lack of available housing would negatively impact the population development of rural areas in the short and long term.

Based on these results, the stated life plans of the respondents were indeed more urban-oriented than their dreams for the future. This relates to the obstacles they foresaw in realising rural residential dreams. Surprisingly, the lack of available housing in rural areas was the most critical factor influencing stated life plans and making them more urban-oriented. As expected, career-related obstacles also played a role in this process.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper explored young Dutch adults' dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles and how these obstacles influence their stated life plans. Most survey respondents dreamed of staying within, or close to, their current place of residence. This was especially the case for male respondents and respondents who reside in rural municipalities. Rural areas close to a city were especially popular as a preferred residential environment in fifteen years, especially among female respondents, respondents aged 18–23 and respondents who reside in an urban municipality. Male respondents, respondents aged 24–30 and respondents who reside in a rural municipality more often have rural villages and remote rural areas as a preferred residential environment in fifteen years. The lifestyle dreams of the respondents were often connected to their residential dreams, with access to leisure activities, family, and friends being mentioned. The career dreams varied but tended to be more urban-oriented than the residential dreams.

The most foreseen obstacles by respondents with a rural residential dream were the lack of available housing and, albeit to a lesser extent, career opportunities in the rural area they dreamed of living. These foreseen obstacles also influenced the stated life plans of focus group participants. They described how the lack of housing and career opportunities in rural areas led them to develop more urban-oriented life plans. This was further strengthened by the focus group participants' preference to let their more urban-oriented career dreams ultimately prevail over their rural residential dream. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic was not perceived by most survey respondents to have impacted their answers.

These results partly support earlier research outcomes. The dreams to stay close to the current location and rural residential dreams confirm the emerging trend that Stockdale and Haartsen (2018) pointed out: young adults increasingly want to stay in rural areas. The importance of lifestyle aspects in the attractivity of rural areas was already shown by Rérat (2014) and Cook and Cuervo (2020). Also, the perception of most survey respondents that Covid-19 had not impacted their answers suggests that they can engage in serious life planning and that their dreams for the future and foreseen obstacles were indeed focusing on the long term. This shows the value of research into life plans, which Anderson and colleagues (2005) and Brooks and Everett (2008) also pointed out, and of the future dreams research as defined by Kuhmonen and colleagues (2016).

A less expected outcome was the lack of housing availability as the most foreseen obstacle to realise future rural residential dreams. Earlier research suggested a lack of career opportunities would be

the most foreseen obstacle (Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Makkai et al., 2017). However, this research rather supports the suggestion of McKee and colleagues (2017) that the need for more appropriate housing is an underestimated reason why young adults might leave rural areas. The strong appearance of this obstacle could be related to the location of Dutch rural areas, which are closer to urban job markets than most European rural areas. Auclair and Vanoni (2017) and González and colleagues suggested that rural areas closer to cities can better maintain young adults.

There are some limitations to the research on which this paper is based. The first limitation is that changing dreams for the future or unforeseen obstacles may influence the eventual choices of research participants. This means that dreams for the future and stated life plans will not necessarily occur. However, earlier research suggests they have some predictive value (Anderson et al., 2005; Brooks & Everett, 2008).

A second limitation is that there might have been a bias in the sample of survey respondents and focus group participants. The survey respondents were younger and lived more rural than the average population in their region. Besides that, young adults more interested in the research topic were likelier to have participated. This could have resulted in an unrepresentative set of results. Moreover, the number of focus group participants is limited compared to the number of survey respondents. In any event, the research participants' dreams, obstacles, and stated life plans exist and influence the regions where they live or dream to live. Although this paper cannot make quantitative claims, it qualitatively shows how foreseen obstacles influence the stated life plans of young Dutch adults, especially those with a rural residential dream.

A final limitation may be the research approach through dreams for the future. This is a relatively new angle to investigate urban-rural migration trends and has yet to be established as an alternative to more classical push-pull models of analysing migration between rural and urban areas (Gollin et al., 2002; Davis & Henderson, 2003). However, the exploratory foresight analysis in this paper shows that urban push and urban pull factors do not always align with the dreams for the future of young adults.

The effects of foreseen obstacles on the stated life plans of young adults with a rural residential dream have policy implications. Removing foreseen obstacles to realising rural residential dreams, such as the lack of housing availability and career opportunities, could enable the fulfilment of the dreams for the future of young adults. However, removing obstacles is not always possible. The dreams of living in larger houses outside settlements contradict Dutch policies that focus on the densification of settlements (Broitman & Koomen, 2020). Moreover, policymakers will balance the dreams of young adults with other existing spatial claims like infrastructure, agriculture, nature, and energy production (RLI, 2021). Removing foreseen obstacles does not necessarily require governmental intervention. For example, the increase in remote work may remove career-related obstacles. De Vos and colleagues (2018) show that for each additional day per week that people work from home, they will, on average, live further away from their work. Although working remotely is impossible in some sectors, a general increase in working remotely, caused by the societal lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, may partly remove the career-related obstacles that young adults with a rural residential dream foresee.

Future research could focus on four topics. First, longitudinal research into dreams for the future, stated life plans, and eventual life choices could investigate the predictive value of dreams for the future and life plans research. This can also compare this foresight analysis to classical push/pull models. Second, the role of foreseen obstacles in the stated life plans of young adults with an urban residential dream could be investigated. It would be interesting to see how these obstacles influence their life plans, primarily if foreseen obstacles differ from those of young adults with a rural residential dream. Third, quantitative research among a representative population sample could test the qualitative outcomes of this paper. Fourth, a repeat of this research in a country with more peripheral rural areas could test the context-dependency of the Dutch results in this paper. This would also reveal if residential-related obstacles appear as important in other countries. This research agenda would support the development of a better understanding of the rural dreams of young adults and help these dreams to come true.

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