



## Problematizing "Left Behind"

Critical analysis and common understanding of 'places left behind', Denmark

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## **WP1: Critical analysis and common understanding of ‘places left behind’**

Anja Jørgensen, Rolf Lyneborg Lund & Hanne Louise Jensen

### **1. National context**

In a Danish context – academically as well as in policies and in the public debate- the term “places left behind” has not been used directly, but a few synonyms and related concepts has been very clear in the Danish debate. First and foremost, the term “Rotten Banana” has turned out to be quite dominant in Denmark. But also, the term “peripheral Denmark”, “fringe-areas” has been a part of the debate. From a very early point in the modern territorial development of Denmark there has been a strong focus on local growth, employment, and equality in and between all regions (Lyck 2014:191). Hence the territorial support arrangement called “regional development support” was developed into “the regional development law” of 1958. In the 1950 the term “unbalanced Denmark” is used but it didn’t develop as a punchy mass media-term presumably because the general opinion was in favor of regional development. Most likely it has to do with the significant role of rural culture in Denmark’s history since 1864. The entire system of cooperatives (andelsbevægelsen), folk high schools (Folkehøjskoler), community centers (Forsamlingshuse), and mission houses (Missionshuse) formed a foundation for the whole nation. In the creation of Danish societal values rural culture stood strong. Economically rural production related to agriculture played a dominant role until 1963 where Danish industrial exports for the first time exceed agricultural exports (Korsgaard 2013; Kristeligt Dagblad 2013). In 1970 the first municipal reform was implemented replacing almost 200 years of fixed administrative boundaries. The new municipalities were in addition to the well-known task of education and poverty reduction also focused on implementing other decentral welfare services in the local communities across the country. The reform is widely acknowledged as a decentralization of the welfare state which was beneficial for the areas outside the larger cities (Tanvig 2018). An increase in public employment was a consequence of the changing administrative structure following the reform. And due to these new employment opportunities, the cities with 1-5.000 inhabitants grew in the 10 years that followed from 1% to 20% of the population (Dybvad 2015) In the 1970 reform and the following in 2007 the economical redistribution between municipalities was adjusted to secure territorial cohesion and equal level of welfare service supply across the country (Etzerodt & Pedersen 2018). This redistribution is as we later will show in focus in much of the public debate. The regional development law was abandoned in 1990. Afterwards a lot of things changed including the terminology. In 1992 the term "Peripheral Denmark" for the first time was used by a Danish journalist in the national newspaper “Weekendavisen” (Lyck 2014:9) and the same year “peripheral Denmark” was included in the Danish National Dictionary. During the 1990’ties a lot of the support arrangements for regional development was overtaken by the development programs of the EU and a decentralized office "management authority for EU funds" was located Silkeborg in Jutland in the western part of Denmark. The European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, as they are called, are managed by the Danish Business Authority (Erhvervsstyrelsen). The Regional and Social funds contribute with yearly funding target growth and employment and are distributed via six Regional Growth Fora, which are the focal point of business development in the regions. In this period a political and public debate about the future of the “peripheral Denmark” intensified. A Danish expert on regional development argue that the period was a turning-point marked by an intensified public rhetoric and at the same time a decrease in political and economic support to regional development (academic expert). In 2007 the Danish administrative reform was implemented which reduced the number of municipalities from 271 to 98 thereby enlarging the number of inhabitants and widening municipal planning responsibility. The administrative reform also changed planning structure at the regional level by reducing the existing 14 counties and replacing them by five regions, moving responsibility to the now larger and more powerful municipalities. Regional growth- and development plans along with government policy and national planning goals serve as framework for municipal planning. Because of the administrative reform Denmark becomes the Nordic country with most inhabitants in its municipalities. And in contrast to the reform in 1970 this reform increased the centralization

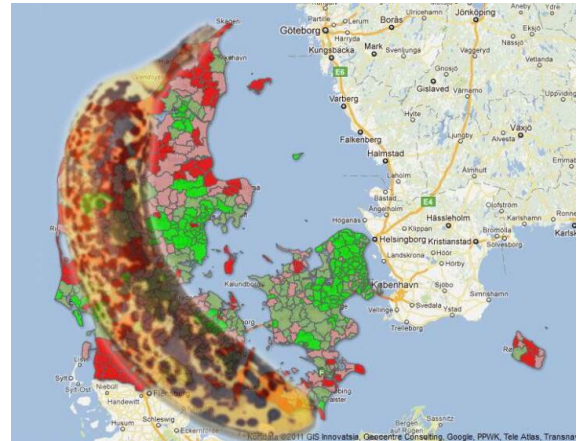
of both resources and decisions as the new administrative centers are fewer and located in larger cities (Tanvig 2018). The lack of employment opportunities in state institution in the smaller cities increase the depopulation of these areas (Dybvad 2015). At the same time this reform diminished the role of regions and increased the role of municipalities. Consequently, the responsibility for ensuring territorial cohesion in terms of social mobility and sustainable economic growth within a region is shared between municipality and region. The municipality is the policy developer and the region an external party that can help make such a policy a success by carrying some of the financial burden and locate attractive public facilities in accordance with municipal policy objectives. The rest of the physical planning and development was centralized to national government level (Ministry of Environment 2007). This reform caused a lot of debate and intense debate about rural development and future possibilities in rural areas. Several discursive and symbolic fights was, as we will see in section 2 & 3, to follow both amongst researchers and in the public policy debate, but before we address this, we will shortly describe which task relates to each of the 3 political levels in Denmark: State, Region, and Municipality. The division is described by the Ministry of Economy and Internal Affairs in 2014. At municipal level tasks related to the social area including caretaking, primary school and some health service and employment, Cultural areas, infrastructure (local roads and some part of public transport). Nature, environment, and planning as well as public utility and response team, local business service and tourism development. At regional level tasks related to hospitals and regional development is in focus. Hospitals and related services account for approximately 97% of the regional expenses leaving almost 3 % to regional development. The regions must develop regional growth and development strategies focusing on the future development of the region related to infrastructure, public transport, business development including tourism, education and employment measures, development in cities and peripheral areas, nature, and environment. At state level tasks relates to law and order, foreign services and aid, developing planning frames for the health area, education (aside from primary school) and research, working environment authority and employment policies, taxation, refusion of some municipal expenses, the larger road net and some of the railway system, early pensions og unemployment expenses, asylum seekers, some cultural areas, business subvention and frames for the planning of nature, environment and other planning areas.

Both within the EU discourses and the national political discourse in Denmark territorial cohesion is at focus. This both with regards to the need to activate local resources and business development. This focus dates, in a Danish context, back to the 1950's. Despite the relative centralization described in this section there are still decentralized supply of social services in all the country, which unactualize the discourse regarding institutional supply deficits in rural areas. In the Danish case the problem regarding social services in rural areas relates to the lack of willingness to occupy the positions (as e.g., medical staff) and the lack of critical mass of population (e.g., Children enough to meaningful run a school). The lack of willingness to move to the rural areas both as a child family and a health care professional is more likely related to the discourses about these areas.

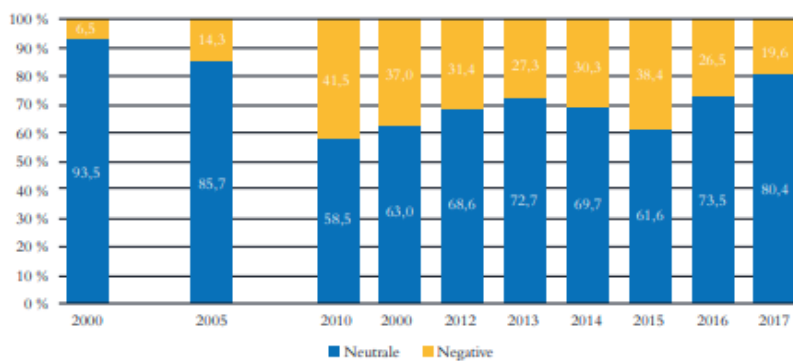
## 2. & 3. Mapping & Contextualization

### “The Rotten Banana” & “The Urban Ghetto”

Being interviewed as an expert in this project the Danish human-geographer Hanne W. Tanvig who developed the term *the rotten banana* tells us that “it is a great regret of mine that I developed this term due to the harm it has given these areas and I warn you to be careful when you ask about and publish on “areas left behind” for the same reason.” (DK-IV-EX1). The term “Rotten Banana” was related to a rising national debate on rural development. The term was introduced in a Danish context in an inverse manner of the European debate of “The Blue Banana”. The term “Blue Banana” was developed by RECLUS and Roger Brunet to problematize the territorial consequences of a growing corridor of urbanization spreading over Western and Central Europe. While the term “Blue Banana” was developed to illustrate a certain spatial pattern of growth, the term “Rotten Banana” was introduced in a Danish context to illustrate a certain spatial pattern of lacking growth. In Denmark this debate catalyzed attention to the growing territorial inequalities caused by continued urbanization leading to a significant population inflow to the largest cities of the country and a following population outflow and depopulation of the fringe areas of the country. In this initial phase the focus was on governance structures, local labor-markets, infrastructure, and public service deliveries later more attention was paid to regeneration and spatial planning.



After the term “Rotten Banana” was coined and launched in the public debate the negative publicity took off. From the below diagram a distinct change in the press coverage of territorial inequality in Denmark can



Note: Rural area in the media ( 2000-2017) The % share of three and four negative terms in newspaper articles (Svendson et al 2018)

be read. The academic experts who originally articulated the concept “Rotten Banana” wanted to pay attention to territorial inequality and the territorial injustice of the political centralization process, but the articulation worked opposite. Hence, it caused a lot of negative attention to a varied range of themes such as depopulation, rural social problems, nomad families, physical decay. Instead of reinforcing these areas it drew a picture of a large part of the

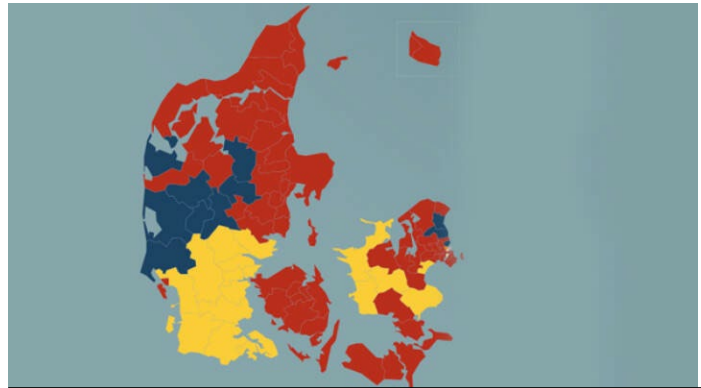
country being in a state of degradation socially, physically and in terms of demography.

In an urban context there has been a lot of both academic and political debate on social segregation in the largest cities of the country. This debate has been focused on inequality and continued and universal quality of welfare-services – especially regarding primary schools -between different urban neighbourhoods (Olsen 2005). When it comes to neighbourhoods with a high concentration of social housing, highest degree of unemployment, lowest degree of education, lowest income, highest degree of former convicted and the highest degree of immigrants with other nationality than Danish, there is a massive attention to the social development. Various Danish governments has, since 1994, implemented six “ghetto-plans”. The latest

includes 22 measures that aims at “...breaking down and preventing parallel societies” in 30 residential areas, which are referred to as “ghettos” (Regeringen, 2018).

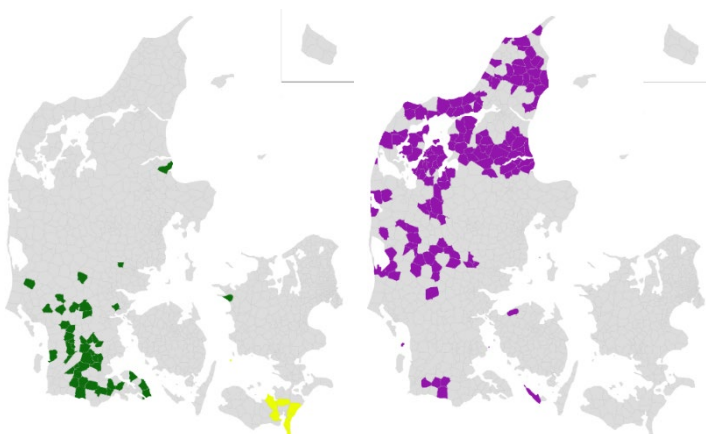
### Political populism as an indicator for feeling “left behind.”

From 2010 to 2015 the debate accelerated and got conflict filled. It crystallized into debates of degree to which settlements in the rural parts of Denmark yields any profit or financial gain or if they are just public expenses (Brodersen et al 2011) on the one hand on the other hand debates on life quality, well-being and local engagement and participation. In the national election in 2015 this debate – for the first time – very clearly influenced the voting. This move was termed “**the yellow Denmark**” and refers to all southern Jutland and central Zealand, where the Danish People's Party became the largest party in the electoral districts and therefore colored those parts of the election map yellow (Dansk Sprognævn 2015).



Note: The map shows where in the country the Social Democrats (red), Danish People's Party (yellow), and Venstre (blue) were the strongest in the 2015 parliamentary election.

In the media the geographic sorting and explosion of “yellow votes” at first was interpreted as related to the Danish debate on migration but after a short while it was clear that it was a result of the intensification of the rural-urban-debate in Denmark (Berlingske Tidende 2015, Skov 2022). In 2017 this interpretation got academic support from two professors of political science Kasper Møller Hansen and Rune Stubager who published a book called “Revolt from the periphery” (Hansen and Stubager 2017). The change between the election in 2015 and 2022 saw a massive shift not only in the number of parties but also in the voter behavior. Where the Danish People’s party was massively represented in the 2015 election, they were barely above the limit for representation in 2022 as seen in the left map below. The debate about immigration was still a large part of many of the center/right-wing parties, and even though migration issues at large has triggered into mainstream policies (Skov 2022) the party “The New Liberals” emerged as a party that was even more restrictive of immigration as seen represented below with green on the left map.



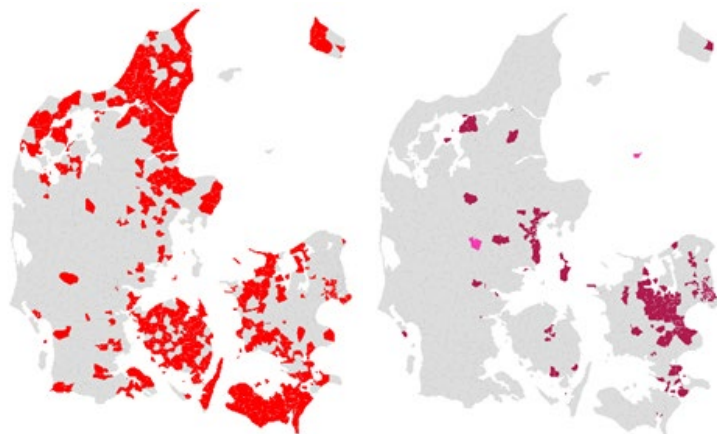
Left: Areas with more than 10% of votes to “The New Liberals” (green) and “The Danish Folk Party” (yellow). Right: Areas with more than 20% of votes to “The Danish Democrats – Inger Støjberg” (purple)

Another new party that had a massive impact on voter behavior was “The Danish Democrats”. This is also why the map is as parted in two. Where the left map shows areas where The Danish People’s Party and The New Liberals received more that 10 percent of the votes, the map on the left shows where The Danish Democrats received more that 20 percent of the votes. The reason behind this split is because the overwhelming number of votes The Danish Democrats received and especially in the rural areas. The Danish Democrats had very few firm political points during the election and had primarily been focusing on a moderately tight immigration policy and more importantly, a discourse of center/periphery. The main

point of the party is, that many “common” Danes cannot reflect themselves in the elites in, as the party

program describes, “the Capitols saloons”. Here, they refer to a metaphor where Denmark is run by the big city elite and entice a feeling of left-behindness in the more rural parts of the population. This is especially shown to influence the rural areas and if the map were to show where they received 10 percent of the votes, all areas except city areas are represented. The Danish Democrats were able to tap into a discourse of center/periphery by pointing out the fact that most Danes lives in what the politicians describe as periphery. Prior to these elections the right-wing newspapers with a focus on the capital readers would add to the discursive wars between the capitol and the rest of the country by framing the economical redistribution between municipalities as “outskirt’s bribe” (Berlingske 25/12 2012), “redistribution circus” (Børsen 15/5 2012), “confiscation” (Berlingske 20/3 2014) and “equalization theft” (www.business.dk 18/6 2010).

The political populism and the feeling of being left behind do in many areas do not correspond with the actual socio-economic status and general performance of these areas, as shown in appendix 1. Historian Christian Egander Skov states (2022) that the political reforms have actively been sucking all life out of several areas of Denmark and sent the clear signaled that these local communities are not worth supporting. He concludes in accordance with our findings that the powerlessness experienced living in those places do to a greater extent relate to being the object of the political elites’ assessments and devaluation than the actual living conditions in these areas. In section 5 we will use this dichotomy between place-based performances, voting behavior and discourse to develop different typologies of left behind places and as part of this argument we also want to highlight how voting behavior maps out with regards to more traditional class-based redistribution.

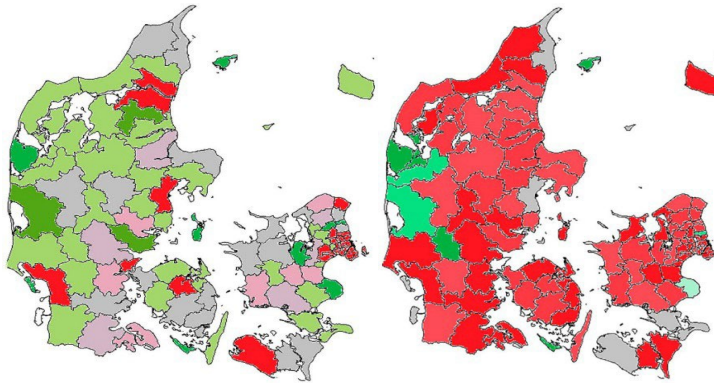


*Left: areas with 30% Social democratic voters. Right: areas with 10% Socialist Folk Party (purple) and The United List (pink)*

### Counter discourse – well-being, happiness, and neo-endogenous perspectives

The articulation “Rotten banana” fueled a counter reaction focused on the positive aspects and successes of rural Denmark. A wide range of articles, academic scientific studies, consultant reports and political debates books focusing on positive aspects of rural Denmark came out. Generally, these contributions can be divided into three categories; one focused on **local economy, growth, and employment**, another focused on **local well-being, mental health, and happiness** and a third vain of attention related to **local governance, communities, and engagement**. Over time the three dimensions was linked as it was emphasized that rural Denmark is marked by significant variations in terms of both local economy, well-being, and local engagement and that places that have a strong link between the three dimensions is doing quite despite the geographical location (Jakobsen, Yding & Johansen 2014; Jørgensen et al 2020). The latter type of rural locations was in the light of interlocking networks in neo-endogenous rural development (Ray, 2006).

A range of counter-discourses emerged: In 2015, the later minister of Housing and Internal Affairs Kaare Dybvad published the debate book “The Myth of the Fringes”. While arguing that the centralization of Denmark that has increased since 2007 is destroying the economy and social cohesion, he also argues that the myth itself is instrumental in increasing. He argues that the resources (approx. 11 billion DKK) which is redistributed from large city areas to peripheral areas, yearly is a too simple approach to the economical balance in the country. He highlights; 1. how the peripheral areas co-finance the public transport in the cities, 2. how employment in public institutions and administration in city areas generate capital and derivative capital, 3. how the export of social clients from the large cities to the periphery and how the financing of the educational system as a total result in redirecting the economical flow from the periphery to the capital area. In addition, “The Myth of the Fringes” also highlights that the media presentation of social life in the peripheral areas is far from the lives being lived. Another focus is the membership associations. “Association-Denmark” and local participation



in non-profit organization and the geographical density of non-profit organizations is strongly represented in rural Denmark Lund, Jørgensen & Riis (2019). As for educational performance several studies concluded that the rate of educational attainment and educational performance were higher in certain rural areas (Lund 2020: Kraka 2022). A place-based index on socioeconomic variables was made by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Interior as an index that measures the relative expenditure needs of a municipality compared to other municipalities based on several criteria that are included in the calculation with different weights. The focus on Life quality in rural Denmark was a theme that grew out of a survey from 2018 among 7000 Danish residents. In rural areas, 82 percent reported that they had 'a high quality of life' while the national average was 76.8 percent. For comparison, in Copenhagen the figure was 74.7 percent (Gallup and Statistics Denmark 2018). Academically, the debate on territorial variation within the different regions of Denmark emerged in the beginning of 2000. Initially it was focused on socio-economic segregation and territorial inequality in urban environment (Andersen 2005; Olsen 2005) but later also applied to rural areas. Territorial inequality was discussed and measured as “neighborhood effects” and often related to much smaller geographical units than has been the case before (Damm, Nielsen og Tranæs 2006; Jørgensen et al 2016). The micro-area way of approaching geography spread into rural areas and a much more varied approach to rural areas and in the urban-rural divide developed (Brodersen 2011; Lund 2019)

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#### 4. How do the 7 guiding themes emerge in the discourses?

Overall the level of welfare supply is great in Denmark despite the growing centralization however at a discursive level most of the 7 guiding themes do appear with the exception of the *digital divide*:

*Social Services and Health*: In most of the discourse related to places left behind it is anticipated that the public spendings on social services are greater than the national average as well as it is assumed that the level of health is relatively poor in these areas due to the social profile of the residents living there. Some of the counter discourses highlight that this is since city-based municipalities subsidize social client’s migration from the cities and into these areas.

*Formal and informal education*: The level of education is highest in and around the larger cities, where the largest concentration of educational institutions is located. However informal education is acknowledged to happen in the outskirts where the entrepreneurial spirit is believed to thriving.

*Employment and professional life*: The reduction in public employment in non-city areas has made it more difficult to work and live in other areas all though some areas are doing fine.

*Community and social life:* The social life in the larger cities carry most value and best opportunities for bridging social capital. Places left behind are devaluated in quality of social life and community.

*Housing, environment and regeneration:* In places left behind most of the housing stock is privately owned, and some of these are rented out. The quality of these houses are low and an active part of countryside renewal involves demolition of the worst of these. Social housing is concentrated in the larger cities.

*Mobility and Immobility:* Most Investments in public transport takes place in the larger cities and rural areas are not very well connected, hence it is difficult to get by without a private car.

## 5. How do these guiding themes map out and which types of ‘left behind places’ emerge?

If national election data from 2022 is compared with variations in the geographical distribution of income, unemployment, and education seen in appendix 1 interesting and tentative patterns appear. First and foremost, the parties that articulated a clear and critical territorial inequality agenda during the 2022 election seem to gain voters from different area-types. Rural areas marked by the lowest income, lowest education and the highest unemployment rates holds the highest degree of Social Democratic and Socialist voters. Rural area with higher income, education and lower degree of unemployment holds the highest degree of right-wing populist voters. When zooming into specific micro-areas variations and exceptions from the dominant picture in-between areas show up. In these in-between areas there seem to be a high concentration of both right-wing populism and social democracy/socialism. Putting all this together there seems to be a dividing line between places with a loss of cultural and symbolic status without necessarily a loss of residential socioeconomic capital, employment, or local social service deliveries, places with a documented loss of residential socioeconomic capital, employment, and local service deliveries and in-between places. While these nuances are invisible at a discursive level they appear when also accounting for the material conditions and election results at a territorial level.

	Right Wing Populism	Social Democracy/Socialism
Places feeling left behind	A loss of cultural and symbolic status without necessarily a loss of residential socioeconomic capital, employment, or local social service deliveries	
Places that are left behind	Although not the most dominant pattern across the country but in the South and to a lesser degree North of Jylland the places that perform poorly also vote for right wing populism	A documented loss of socioeconomic capital, employment, and high spendings on local social service deliveries.
Places feeling fine.		In part of the country the tradition for Social Democracy and socialism is strong despite the thriving of these places - Mostly in cities

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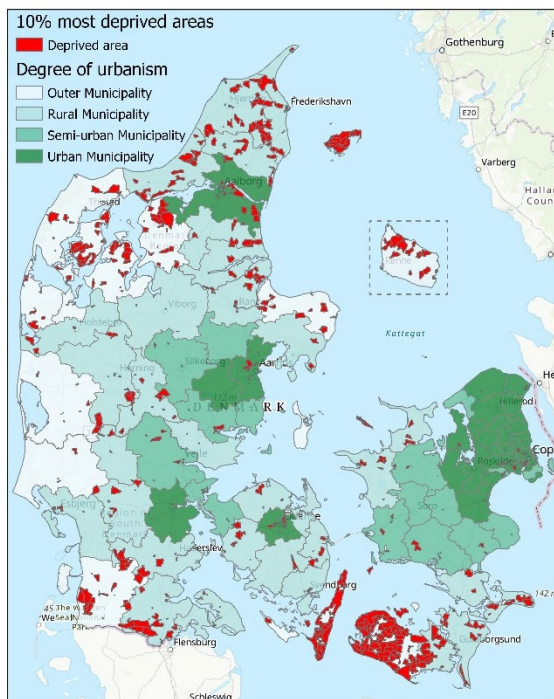
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## Appendix 1



Composite measure of, education,  
unemployment and income