

# Agency in population policies

Frans Willekens

## *Introduction*

Throughout his professional career, Nico demonstrated a strong interest in an adequate demographic knowledge base for social policies. He played key roles in research programming, synthesis of demographic knowledge and dissemination of research findings to policy makers and the general public. Nico came to NIDI to help launch the National Programme for Demographic Research (NPDO) and continued to coordinate periodic studies on the state of the population in the Netherlands, the consequences and their policy implications (WPRB). Around 2004 Nico was instrumental in the establishment by the European Commission of a European demographic observatory with the aim to inform the social policy debate. He assembled a consortium of population research institutes that produced the Demography Monitor 2005, which provided the knowledge base for the Green Paper *Confronting demographic change: A new solidarity between generations* (European Commission, 2005). Other Demography Monitors followed (2007 and 2008) and they provided a basis for Demography Reports of the European Commission (2007, 2008 and 2010). The European network that was established for the Demography Monitor evolved into a more permanent European partnership: *Population Europe*. The partnership, under the auspices of EAPS, was formally founded on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2009 at a meeting at NIDI. Nico was appointed member of the Board of Governors and the liaison person for the Netherlands. Today, Population Europe is a demographic knowledge infrastructure for policy makers, the media, schools and the general public.

Throughout history, two opposing approaches to population policies and social policies dominated the debate and the policy measures that resulted. The approaches differ mainly in the belief in human agency, *i.e.* in the capability to reason and act independently. People who believe in that capability endorse other policies than those who do not believe. In this paper I illustrate that difference with reference to population growth and population diversity.

## *Population growth*

In a recent paper (Van Nimwegen, 2013), Nico asked the question that is on the minds of many of us: “What are the best ways to tap the rich human resources of an aging and more diverse population?” He gave a simple but most effective answer to these new demographic realities of Europe. To unleash the full potential of an aging and more diverse population, one should emphasize the skills and talents of people. Instead of focusing on population size and composition, one should concentrate on what people can do. That belief in human agency and entrepreneurship is rooted in the best Christian Protestant ethic and the teaching of Max Weber. It characterizes Nico’s responses to the challenges ahead. It underlies his promotion of ‘active aging’ and continued participation, which he sees as a way to make use of the full potential of older persons (Van Nimwegen and Van Praag, 2012; Van Nimwegen, 2012), and his view of migration as an “opportunity for migrants to use their skills and talents which cannot be used in the country that they leave behind.”

The emphasis on capabilities and human agency has a long tradition in population studies. Condorcet believed that humans are “capable of reasoning and of acquiring moral ideas”, *i.e.* they are capable of acting independently and responsibly. As early as 1794, he anticipated the voluntary reduction of fertility and the emergence of a small family norm. That would resolve the population problem. Universal education, according to Condorcet, is the key to success. That enlightenment view at the time of the French Revolution was vigorously opposed in 1798 by Malthus, who did not believe that most people, and in particular the lower classes of society, are capable of reasoned action. He opposed social welfare programs because people would respond by having more children. He also opposed contraception as a preventive check: “Indeed, I should always particularly reprobate any artificial and unnatural methods of checking population, both on account of their immorality and their tendency to remove a necessary stimulus to industry. If it were possible for each married couple to limit by a wish the number of their children, there is certainly reason to fear that the indolence of the human race would be very greatly increased.” (Malthus, 1817 edition, p. 368; also quoted by Winch, 1996, p. 57).<sup>1</sup> The opposing views revealed a very different model of man. For Condorcet, the future will be dominated by freedom of mind and rational and responsible decisions: “The time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free man who know no other master but their reason; when tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments will exist only in works of history and on the stage; and when we shall think of them only to pity their victims and their dupes; to maintain ourselves in a state of vigilance by thinking on their excesses; and to learn how to recognize and so to destroy, by force of reason, the first seeds of tyranny and superstition, should they ever dare to reappear among us.” Malthus viewed this as pure speculation. He did not believe in the perfectibility of man and human agency but in laws of nature that apply to both animals and humans. He defended his view that “The perpetual tendency in the race of man to increase beyond the means of subsistence is one of the general laws of animated nature which we can have no reason to expect will change.” (Malthus, 1798, p. 109). The Condorcet-Malthus debate reflects two rival approaches to dealing with the population problem that are rooted in very different beliefs in and respect of individual capabilities. The debate continues today, with Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and others advocating human development and the capability approach on one side and those favoring restrictive legal, economic and other measures to curtail population growth on the other side (Sen, 1994).

### *Diversity*

One of the subjects Nico addresses in his publications is population diversity. Europe is becoming more diverse. New member countries have social, economic and cultural settings and past experiences that differ considerably from those of the old members states. International migration adds to the diversity. Migration between member states for reasons of study, employment, marriage, climate or cost of living increases the demographic mix of neighbourhoods, regions and countries. Migration across the borders of Europe changes the demographic landscape and triggers a growing cultural diversity, manifested in different values, norms and customs. Nico recognizes that diversity can spur economic growth but can

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<sup>1</sup> Malthus considered later marriage as the main preventive check.

also put a strain on social cohesion. By identifying people's capabilities and bringing out their talents, population diversity is turned from a liability into an asset that can be used to address the challenges that confront Europe. Others consider that vision unrealistic and not different from Condorcet's utopianism. They do not trust the power of human agency.

At the workplace, diversity management has become an integral part of human resource management. Individual differences are recognized and, where possible, used to the advantage of the organization. At the macro level, population diversity, in particular cultural diversity, is often considered a threat. In an influential paper, Putnam (2007) claims that, in neighborhoods in the USA, ethnic diversity reduces social solidarity and trust, diminishes social capital and endangers social cohesion. Lancee and Dronkers (2011) found similar results for Europe. The effects dominate in the short run. In the long run, diversity is likely to have significant cultural and economic benefits. Others consider diversity an asset for society. Page (2007) stresses the power of diversity. Individuals with widely different backgrounds and experiences spur creativity and innovation because they have various ways of looking at problems, conditions and challenges. In 2010, US president Obama recognized the power of diversity when he stated, in a remark on comprehensive immigration reform: "In an increasingly interconnected world, the diversity of our country is a powerful advantage in global competition." (Obama, 2011).

The debate on the effects of diversity did not yet produce conclusive evidence. The effects of diversity depend on contextual factors. Dahlberg *et al.* (2012) identified effects of redistribution policies and programs on ways people approach population diversity. Redistribution receives more support if the society is homogeneous. In heterogeneous societies, such as the USA, support is less. In relatively homogeneous welfare states with large redistribution programs, support for redistribution declines with increasing population diversity. The underlying mechanism is homophily. People are supportive for redistribution to other people with similar background. It is an expression of the tendency of people to associate and bond with similar others. As a corollary, an increase in population diversity is often considered a threat to the welfare state, simply because solidarity is generally less with people who are different. Recently, Nijjahr (2013) used that insight to advocate a different integration policy in Germany, a policy that is pre-occupied less with groups and differences between groups, and more with individuals and their capabilities and agency. What she advocates is essentially enlightenment in the migration and integration debate and policy.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout his professional career, Nico played a central role in the design of a demographic knowledge base for social policy and he did not refrain from using his demographic expertise to recommend policies and policy perspectives. Social research is usually not value-free. If Malthus would have asked "What are the best ways to tap the rich human resources of a growing population?", he would have reached a completely different conclusion. His model of man discouraged him from asking that question. If Condorcet would have viewed human behavior as governed by 'general laws of animated nature', he would have reached different conclusions. Different models of man lead to different policies. Scientists should follow

Nico's example and be transparent about the mental model they use (and the implied axioms and assumptions) to interpret the world and to recommend policies.

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# Demographers and policy makers

Charlotte Höhn

## *A personal introduction*

I met Nico van Nimwegen as early as 1978. He had just started to work for the NIDI, I had already published a number of articles and in particular population projections for (then West) Germany, but still felt pretty new in the world of demographers. As a matter of fact Nico and I belong to the same generation. And so we entered the world of demography practically together in the seventies, in the eighties we expanded our activities to European demography (mainly with the foundation of EAPS) and with that (as representative of our country or EAPS or IUSSP) to World demography. I am sure Nico will agree with me that demographic analysis and population studies are great study fields, even fun. We also both gratefully acknowledge to have met and sometimes even have made friends with the same ‘big wheels’ in demography, mainly those always a little older than we. Those of our generation or younger (and younger and younger) almost immediately became colleagues and friends. There are few (if any) unpleasant demographers in this world. We always have a topic (best discussed over a glass of wine or beer to be replenished). Nico and I have emptied quite a number of beers together. And the good thing about retirement, dear Nico, is: Your friends are still at population conferences and seminars, because we are not dumped after retirement. No! We remain demographers all our life. Since we can talk about demography for many decades to come I will not contribute another demographic analysis, but write a few observations on demographers and policy makers.

## *A brief typology of policy makers involved in demographic research*

Occasionally we demographers meet policy makers of our respective governments; it is actually a long series of policy makers that one encounters in the course of four decades. Some policy makers fortunately are in favour of demographic research, others not. The latter give rise to justification of the research programme, the size and location of the institute, possibly even its existence. Both NIDI and BiB had difficult spells in their existence when evaluations and reorganisation practically stopped demographic research. Both institutes survived, developed and grew.

Some policy makers invite demographers to prepare demographic reports, to present demographic trends and population projections, or even explain certain phenomena, *e.g.* why fertility is so low, why other countries such as France have a higher fertility, what could be done. These are our darling policy makers because we can exhibit our accumulated knowledge.

Some policy makers love to talk about demographic change, others avoid the subject. Those ‘addressing’ demographic change in colourful and moving words too often remain vague (at least we believe so, in our proud opinion). We demographers should be grateful instead, because such political speeches create a public awareness that most demographers with their technical papers can never achieve. The media will give ample coverage to speeches of Minister X and Y (and very little, if any, to our publications or conferences).

Sometimes policy makers will implement measures or reform social security systems, and this is what we demographers always hoped for. If our institute or even a particular demographer is mentioned as inspiration for such welcome policies we just dropped our findings, or were heard in consultation, in the ideal moment, *i.e.* when the policy was ready to be launched. We are at best a justification for what would have been done anyway.

#### *Policy makers at population conferences*

Policy makers of the highest possible level quite often are invited to open a population conference. This is a guarantee for media coverage, as I already underscored. We occasionally are asked to draft their speech. The more we hear and read of our contribution the more reason we have to be happy. In my experience the policy maker as a rule has a remarkable gift to focus and at the same time simplify also demographic phenomena. Sentences are simply shorter, more oriented to the audience (and less to academic book and journal style). There are no footnotes and no references, no heavy mathematics and theory discussion. If the simplification reflects the substance this is a much more appealing speech than most of demographers could deliver.

Another place for policy makers at population conferences are panel discussions, sometimes a journalist will ask the questions. It is interesting to listen because one will rarely hear anything problematic. At best there are certain challenges to be tackled. Mostly we will be presented with opportunities and chances. Even rapid demographic ageing is a bright prospect “because living longer is an achievement and opens so many opportunities to virtually everybody”. Indeed life expectancy increased thanks to healthy life styles and medical progress. And it is also true that this is a reason for population ageing. The other reason –low fertility (resulting in a smaller labour force)– is usually not discussed. There were arguments that fewer births and less people should be good for the environment. There still is voiced the hope that women (and in particular mothers) will boost the labour force – as to more birth every effort has to be made to reconcile work and life balance. Nico and I have heard such political assertions for decades, and we still wait for their implementation or even their positive impact.

It is quite clear: Demographic change cannot be a favourite topic of policy makers because there is no immediate remedy to population age structure and no easy success story to increase fertility. Also immigration is no easy measure. Policy makers have understood (with quite some delay) that ‘replacement migration’ will not stop or even reverse demographic ageing. It can mitigate labour shortage (interesting enough a number of European countries has appallingly high youth unemployment!?!). Policy makers do not tire to underscore the benefits of highly skilled immigrants. One could not agree less if only the dire reality of undocumented and ‘less’ skilled immigration would not spoil our appreciation.

#### *Let us stay in the demographers’ world*

The problem is: Demographers and policy makers live in different worlds. Policy makers wish to be elected; for that goal they have the really needed talent to highlight advantages and chances and to propose feasible solutions. They will present positive change; they will not right away tell their electorate the cost of their measures. They mention what can be gained or improved for everybody. They shy to cut existing programmes or to drastically

change benefits. They want to give and not to take. Therefore problems have to be ignored as long as possible.

Demographers (as all scientists) analyse phenomena in depth. They discuss theories and paradigms; they look at issues from all angles. They do not avoid negative or problematic aspects. They do their research *sine ira et studio* as the ancient Romans would say. Demographers attach no value judgements (as far as we can...), and their main interest is to promote knowledge.

I do hope Nico agrees that demographic research is fun, that it remains always interesting to study new data, new methods, new theoretical opinions. This is a marvellous world in which we are and will stay.

In comparison policy makers will stay only for an electoral period, or two or three. Some times they change their field of competence. Why should they invest much energy in specific fields such as demography?

Demographers stay in their field, perhaps shifting from fertility to mortality or immigration. But the methods and materials remain with gradual improvement. The best thing is that demographers live in a relatively small and international community. Once accepted one is never short of interesting colleagues with new ideas at meetings, ready to discuss matters of common interest. The really lucky ones, and Nico belongs to them, find lifelong friends in this small, but great demographic world. Therefore, enjoy demography, dear Nico, as long as you can. Stay with us in the world of demographers.