

Population Review

Volume 50, Number 2, 2011

Type: Report pp. 23-26

Shifts in the Focus of Population Policies: Concluding Remarks on the XXXV Chaire Quetelet Symposium

Author: Nico van Nimwegen

Affiliation: Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI)

Corresponding author/address: nimwegen@nidi.nl

Scope of this contribution

The symposium, “Population Policies in Europe and in North America”, XXXV Chaire Quetelet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 18-20 October 2009, covered a wide range of studies treating major issues on the interface of population trends and policy implications. The studies reported ranged from migration to family issues, labour market and social security but also included theoretical, methodological, ethical and data issues. Also experiences from a host of geographical areas were reported. In this contribution I will not try to summarize the outcomes of the symposium other than to say that the harvest of contributions was very rich and diverse and the conclusion is warranted that the field of policy studies has entered a new and very dynamic phase. Also I will not try to answer the question which scientific innovations were presented and how the symposium managed to advance our insights into the population-policy nexus. It was however very clear that in the field of policy studies a shift is taking place from more descriptive to more analytical studies. Finally I will definitely not try to distill policy recommendations from the diverse set of studies although in my view at least some of the work that was presented is very relevant to policymakers. In the following I will present a few general observations which result from the presentations and discussions at the symposium.

Types of policies

First of all it is useful to make a distinction in the broad domain of “population policies”. Here two types of policies are distinguished. The first type of policies may be labeled as “population policies in the strict sense”. These policies are designed to have an impact on population trends and processes like fertility, migration, mortality or population growth. The objectives of these policies are formulated in demographic terms, mostly as quantitative targets (such as the curbing of population growth or increasing fertility). These policies set out to influence demographic trends: they wish to change the course of demographic developments. There is a whole body of literature which suggests that it is very difficult to change demographic trends and that the impact of policies should not be overrated (see for example Hoem, 2008, Gauthier, 2007, Gauthier & Hatzius, 1997, Neyer & Andersson, 2007). This implies that we need to be very modest when we speak of the impact of policies on demographic trends. Most examples of population policies in the strict sense are policies in the field of fertility, either pro-natalist or anti-natalist in nature.

© 2011 Population Review Publications

The most striking example of an effective population policy is of course China's one child policy. From a human rights perspective this policy (as well as other examples such as the forced sterilization campaigns in India in the 1970s) can be severely criticized which created a negative image that has long been attached to population policies. Less intrusive population policies, such as pro-natalist measures that introduce financial incentives to parents like birth premiums, are found to be less effective to promote lasting demographic change.

The second type of policies is generally referred to as "population-related policies". These policies are developed for other than demographic reasons such as gender equity, wellbeing, poverty reduction or to increase labour force participation. The policies are linked to population dynamics (hence the name population-related). They may also take demographic considerations into account. However, the policies are not introduced or primarily motivated by demographic reasons; they do not intend to change the pathways of demographic processes. They may however have a demographic impact. Labour-market policies and most family policies fall under the heading of population-related policies. In both cases it will be clear that these policies may have demographic consequences. Generally they are, however, not introduced to reach a specified demographic target. As is the case with the other type of policies, also the demographic impact of population-related policies is difficult to establish.

Policy shifts

In the last decades of the 20th century the world witnessed a shift away from population policies (which were not very popular, at least not in most developed countries) to population-related policies. In this process a shift from demographic targets to demographic "contexts" took place. From policies aimed at lower fertility or zero population growth, more broadly defined goals, such as improving reproductive health and poverty reduction became the principal objective. The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) which convened in Cairo in 1994 was the highlight of this shift in policy paradigm. Policies aimed at reducing the incompatibilities of work and family life and promoting a more family or child friendly society were typical examples of population-related policies in developed countries. In developing countries the policy focus typically shifted from a family planning to a broader reproductive health perspective. In the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were agreed upon at the beginning of the 21st century, the quantitative targets saw a come-back. However, the distinction with the previous target-driven population policies was clear. In the MDGs the targets refer directly to broad social issues like health care, literacy, poverty and education. They are truly "development" goals. For several of the MDGs demographic processes, however, are very important and demographic targets are seen as instrumental to reach the development goals. The health-related MDGs, including the one to reduce infant mortality by two thirds by the year 2015, are clear examples. The demographic targets, however, are no longer a goal in themselves. As far as the MDGs are concerned, population policies and demographic targets changed from being an "end" in themselves, to being a "means to reach an ulterior goal".

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, we saw a revival of population policies in some developed countries such as Australia, Germany, Russia and Korea. Concerns of sustained low fertility gave rise to some "old fashioned" policy measures like birth premiums (see McDonald, 2006). But despite this revival, the broader framed population-related policies remained the more dominant type. Yet, also in these policies more often than before, reference is made to growing demographic concerns like low fertility and population ageing. In the European Union, for instance, pleas for more family-friendly policies that aim to reconcile work and family, and also for policies to promote gender equality and intergenerational solidarity in the context of population ageing, express concerns for the "challenge" of low fertility. The policy measures are discussed in the framework of "demographic renewal" which, to a critical observer, at least has some connotation with the pro-natalist concerns of earlier population policy (e.g. European Commission 2005, 2006; Van Nimwegen & Van der Erf, 2010).

The various policy shifts are reflected in demographic research. Until quite recently, scientific seminars on population policy focused primarily on population policies in the strict sense. In fact, these seminars were mostly limited to one specific demographic event, i.e. fertility and or family policies. Other types of policies were not considered. The papers that were presented at these meetings tended to be very descriptive and more often than not dealt with country case studies, although there were exceptions with more advanced research designs. Nowadays the field of population policy studies is much broader and is being revitalized. This trend was perfectly reflected in the 2009 Chaire Quetelet. At this seminar papers on fertility and the family were discussed as before, but also presentations on migrants and migration policy were given as well as papers on labour market policies. A nice dose of gender policies was added and also several papers on intergenerational issues were presented. The research designs were not limited to describing current policies but were also analytical in nature trying to grasp the impact of policies. As was the case in the 2009 International Population Conference of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population in Marrakech, the 2009 Chaire Quetelet clearly demonstrates, in my view, that the field of population policy studies has matured.

Discussion

Although the field has moved forward, I still have some concerns. Sometimes we, as researchers, cannot resist the temptation to make strong policy recommendations while the empirical basis for these recommendations is weak. In my view this is dangerous for our discipline, and this habit can easily undermine our scientific status. Our role as scientists is to study, to analyze and to inform policy makers or other audiences. Policy makers and politicians may use that information, prudently we hope, to formulate policies. This division of roles in the policy formulation process is too important to be overlooked.

Our role as scientists is also to pose critical questions and to keep asking them. Allow me to clarify this with a simple example. As demographers we have successfully introduced the concept of “replacement fertility”. We all agree that if fertility levels as measured by the Total (period) Fertility Rate stay below the famous 2.1 benchmark for a sustained period of time, the rate of population growth will decline when other factors (migration!) remain constant. And, eventually, population growth may become negative. The 2.1 fertility benchmark is a useful tool for demographers. But increasingly it is also being used by politicians and policy makers as a target in itself. In this view, below replacement fertility is perceived to be negative as such. This approach seems to sanctify the adagio that “growth is good”, as well as the belief that growth should always continue. Even slow levels of population decline seem to scare us. This is becoming more important when slow population decline is becoming a reality for an increasing number of European regions, and indeed also at the national level for some countries. Do we, as scientists, have empirical reasons for this position? Or is it “just” ideology? And do we fully consider the broader perspective of continuing world population growth and the population-environment nexus when we adhere to the eternal population growth adagio? Political and ethical issues are always at stake when population policies are being discussed. In my view, demographers need to stay vigilant and defend the empirical nature of their work, also and perhaps especially in the field of population policy studies which can easily turn into an ethical minefield. On a more practical note and taking current demographic realities (at least in Europe) into account, population policy analysts would be well advised to add the possible impacts of population decline to their research agenda (Van Nimwegen & Heering, 2007). It may be more rewarding to study the complex issues of how dominant demographic trends may be accommodated than to ponder how these trends may be changed.

The 2009 Chaire Quetelet made a firm contribution to the empirical study of population policies. The organizers and participants should be commended for this. It was a genuine pleasure to engage in three days of focused and sound scientific debate on some highly relevant social and policy issues.

References

European Commission. 2005. Green Paper. Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations, COM (2005) 525, and COM (2005) 94.

European Commission. 2006. The demographic future of Europe-from challenge to opportunity, COM (2006) 571.

Gauthier, A.H. 2007. The impact of family policies on fertility in industrialized countries: a review of literature, *Population Research and Policy Review* 26:323-346

Gauthier, A.H. and J. Hatzius.1997. Family benefits and fertility: an econometric analysis, *Population Studies* 51 (3):295-306

Hoem, J. M. 2008. The impact of public policies on European fertility, *Demographic Research* (19) 249-259

McDonald, P. 2006. Low fertility and the state: the efficacy of policy, *Population and Development Review* 32 (3): 485-510

Neyer, G. and G. Andersson 2007. Consequences of family policies on childbearing behaviour: effects or artifacts? MPIDR Working Paper. Rostock: Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research

Nimwegen, Nico van and Liesbeth Heering (eds) 2009. *Bevolkingsvraagstukken in Nederland anno 2009. Van groei naar krimp. Een demografische omslag in beeld* [Population issues in the Netherlands anno 2009. From growth to decline. Views on a demographic turn around] NIDI Rapport 80. KNAW Press: 1-225

Nimwegen, Nico van & Rob van der Erf (eds) 2010. *Demography Monitor 2008. Demographic trends, socio-economic impacts and policy implications in the European Union*. NIDI Rapport 82. KNAW Press: 1- 161