

Do people fear population decline?

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This week the world population is projected to reach seven billion. Yet in some countries the prospect of a decline in population is worrying policymakers far more. This column asks what the people think, focusing on a survey from the Netherlands. It turns out that most people are in favour of global population decline, but “not in my backyard”.

The threat of population decline is not unique in demographic history and has always been accompanied by stories of doom and gloom. During the first half of the 20th century the decline in fertility and the quality of the newborn were a matter of public debate in many Western European countries (Wicksell 1914 and Keynes 1937). Current trends in fertility and mortality indicate that most developed countries face the real possibility of population decline (see [Geys et al 2007](#) on this site).

A striking element in the debate about population decline is that it is dominated by concerned politicians, local government officials, academics, and journalists who are always on the lookout for ‘a good doom story’. However, amid these parties there is one stakeholder conspicuously absent – the citizens who have to live in regions or towns threatened by population decline. This is an unfortunate omission because the quality of living arrangements is an important determinant of local voting behaviour. Citizens can vote by casting a ballot in elections or, if they lose their faith in government, they may vote with their feet by migrating to regions or countries where life still seems good. Under such circumstances, migration can reinforce population decline developments.

In this column we address two questions with respect to the issue of population decline from the angle of the citizen, using data from the Netherlands.

- First, what are the population size preferences of Dutch citizens concerning the population level of their place of residence and at the country level?
- Second, how can these preferences be explained?

Data

The citizens in question will be the inhabitants of the Netherlands. A

perspective on the Netherlands is interesting for a number of reasons.

- Demographic projections predict that in 2025 more than one half of the Dutch municipalities will experience population decline.

This development is met with great concern by local government and makes for alarmist messages in national media. Population decline is slowly but gradually becoming part of the Dutch reality, and in some regions it is already a fact of life.

- The Netherlands is one of the most crowded and urbanised nations in the world; this high population density would seem to make the Dutch sensitive to issues of population size and structure.

In fact, feelings of overpopulation are among the main drivers of emigration of Dutch natives in recent years (Van Dalen and Henkens 2007, 2008). To capture population preferences and underlying attitudes toward population growth, we developed a survey carried out in 2009 among the Dutch population (over 2000 replies were received) in which population size preferences as well as expected consequences of population decline were measured at different regional levels.

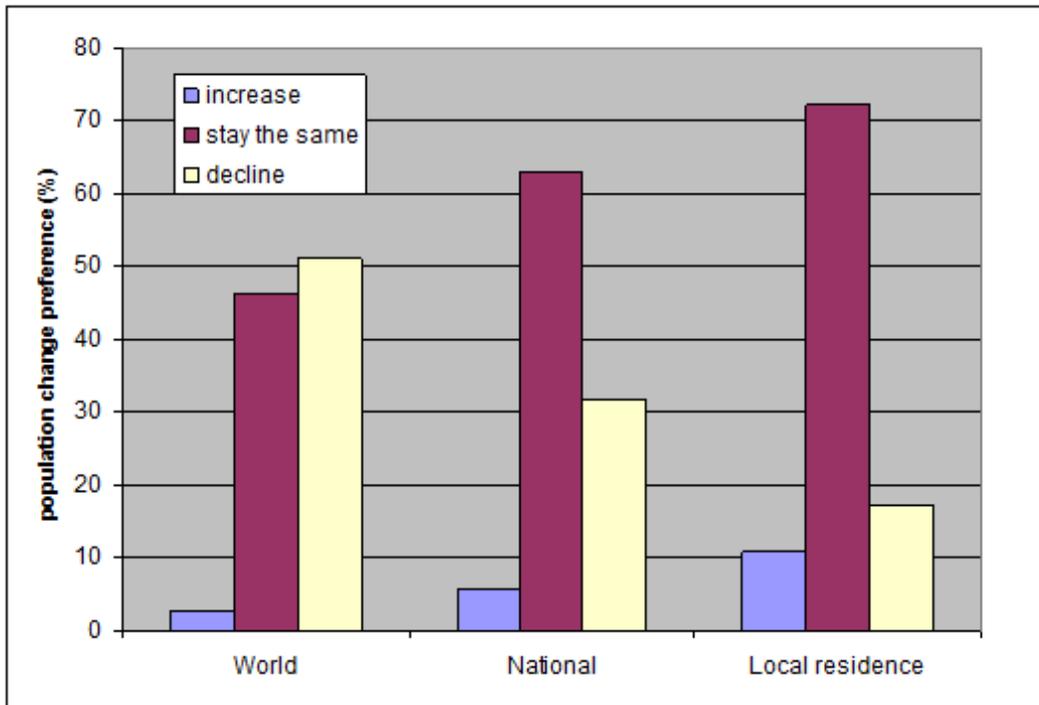
Population size preferences

One of the elements of the debate on population decline is that the geographical perspective is either unclear, or it is not consistently applied by citizens and politicians (Teitelbaum and Winter 1985). Discussions sometimes focus on the global level, with commentators suggesting that the growth in the world's population exceeds the carrying capacity of the earth. Other debates centre on individual countries, regions, or cities. In addition to letting the people speak, and not the authorities, in this paper we seek to disentangle the population size preferences of the Dutch for different geographical perspectives that seem to play a role in population debates. Population size preferences are asked with respect to three levels of aggregation: population of the place of residence, at the national level, and at the global level.

The majority of the Dutch are in favour of *global* population decline (see Figure 1). However, the preference for a smaller population is not applicable when the geographic focus moves closer to home: 31% desire a smaller population for the Netherlands and, as soon as the question refers to their local place of residence, only 16% opt for population decline. Most of the respondents prefer the status quo for their country and/or their city of residence. In other words, in their view the population sizes at home are more or less optimal, it is only at the level of the world that changes are needed.

Figure 1. Preferred population sizes at the global, national and local (place of

residence) levels, The Netherlands, 2009



Source: NIDI survey on population decline (2009)

Explaining population size preferences

What explains these geographic differences in population preferences? The picture seems to suggest that to a certain extent population size preferences may be subject to what is generally known as the “not-in-my-backyard” (NIMBY) syndrome. The general attitude is that population decline is beneficial development for the world at large, but not for one’s hometown.

At this point it becomes important to assess how people perceive the effects of population growth on the economy and how they assess the contribution of migration to population growth. Immigration has over the years become a more important element of national population growth and considering the mixed feelings with respect to immigrants this element may affect their judgement. In our study we focus on the effects for the local and national economy and we test for differences across the supporters of either a population decline or a population increase with those citizens who favour the status quo. Two results stand out:

- Supporters of population growth are the ones who think the material, direct consequences of decline (higher taxes, fewer public amenities, lower economic growth) are real and also weigh them at a higher rate than the supporters of a population decline, who are not bothered as much by these direct consequences. The latter group gives more weight to the externalities of population decline (better environment and space, less pollution, congestion effects) than the supporters of population

growth.

- Close inspection of the group supporting a decrease in the population reveals an odd political feature, as the supporters of a population decline are found at the extremes of the political spectrum. On the one hand, proponents of lower population numbers can be found among those who oppose international migration, and such supporters can be found mainly among right-wing voters. On the other hand, we *also* find proponents of population decline among people who are concerned about global warming and the preservation of open space and nature at the national level, and they can usually be found among left-wing voters. In short, supporting population decline makes for strange bedfellows.

Conclusion

The bottom line of this story is that population decline is certainly not always met with fear – it is even welcomed by some. It appears that citizens have a far more nuanced assessment of population decline than was previously believed. Our study (see for more details Van Dalen and Henkens 2011) suggests that people are well aware of the potential economic disadvantages of population decline, but they can also see the potential nonmaterial benefits of population reductions. In that respect, local and national governments might learn an important lesson from their own citizens and view population decline in a balanced manner.

In addition to the material and nonmaterial driving forces, it appears that the attitude toward immigrants is a very strong determinant of preferences at the local and national levels. The arrival of new immigrants seems to generate a stronger fear factor than the prospect of population decline. The more people perceive immigration to be a disruptive force in society, the less they are in favour of a population increase or – the reverse – the more they favour population decline.

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