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Nico van Nimwegen and the development of demography in Europe

Dirk van de Kaa

Recruitment

For several years after its establishment the Netherlands Interuniversity Demographic Institute, as it was then called, was heavily committed to the preparation of the scientific report of the State Committee on Population issues (*Staatscommissie Bevolkingsvraagstukken*). As the Minister responsible for the Commission, the Minister for Health and Environmental Hygiene, dr. Stuyt, observed thankfully during his inaugural address on 22 March 1972, the board of NIDI had put its director at the disposal of the Commission in the role of scientific secretary. This implied that NIDI could play a, very welcome and rewarding, role in stimulating demographic research in the country. But for the director it meant that, at least for a while, his own research would have to be put on the back burner.

The final report was completed in December 1976. It was submitted to the government in early 1977 and, mostly, well-received. However, its central recommendation that the end of natural population growth in the country should be welcomed, appeared to be out-dated before the report saw the light. The serious concerns that had led to the decision to establish a *Staatscommissie* to look into population growth issues had evaporated. For as early as 1973 the total fertility rate dropped below replacement level.

The research work that had to be carried out for the Commission had implied a small, but steady flow of money to all deserving population scientists in the country, including those at NIDI. In an effort to let it continue the outline of a national programme of demographic research was prepared at the institute, pro-actively. Using the internal report we had drafted in a small working group (*Verkenningen*, 1974), I started my lobbying task at the Ministry of Education and Science Policy forthwith. Not entirely surprising, perhaps, I received a very favourable response. It turned out that launching ‘national research programmes’ was precisely the means the Minister for Education and Science Policy had chosen to manifest himself as a force to be reckoned with in science and scholarship at the national level. I was promptly invited to come to the Royal Academy in Amsterdam to present the plan for demography in an address at a special session of the General Board of the Academy. When word got out that Queen Juliana would be present, two ministers of the crown vied for pride of place and numerous other dignitaries peopled the first rows. I had quite a distinguished audience!

In anticipation of the successful launching of the National Programme of Demographic Research (NPDO) steps had been taken to recruit a deputy secretary for its Steering Committee. The post was advertised in national newspapers and we soon received applications. One of these was of a young man with dark hair and a luxurious moustache called Nico van Nimwegen. He had majored in sociology at my *alma mater*, had taken demography as a minor and had been involved, on a small scale, in demographic research activities. I was looking for someone with a broad interest in the discipline, who could draft well, could deal



with sponsors, government officials, and researchers smoothly, and who could stand the pressure of having to carry a heavy work load every now and then. Nico looked a promising candidate from that perspective. But as much depended on his ability to get on well with very different people, to produce memoranda quickly, not to become anxious or flustered when difficulties accumulated, and to show a certain willingness to take risks cheerfully if circumstances so demanded, I asked him to submit to a psycho-technical assessment. I was very pleased to find that I had every reason to stick to my intention of appointing him. He entered NIDI as of 15 September 1977 and for as long as funds would allow.¹ My plan for the longer term was to steer him in an international direction. It seemed to me that as time passed NIDI increasingly would be required to assume a really active role in European demography. Thus it would be wise to have a young person at hand who could move confidently in a politically complicated setting and who could easily befriend, laugh and drink with a rich variety of Europeans.

Natural habitat

As it turned out precisely such a setting was Nico's natural habitat. He liked to meet and talk to demographers from abroad whenever we succeeded in having one to visit and lecture at the Institute. I saw with approval that he enjoyed company and parties and was always willing to put his arm around an inviting shoulder, male or female. So, when on 31 March 1983

¹ As it turned out the NPDO only was the first of a long list of research planning activities in demography. In 1983 it was succeeded by the PCDO (Programmeringscollege Demografisch Onderzoek) which, in turn, passed the task of programming research on to the NIDI Advisory Council. In 1990, finally, the national research foundation (NWO) launched its priority programme of demographic research.

Table 1. Overview of the functions of Nico van Nimwegen in the Council of the European Association for Population Studies (EAPS) and at its general conferences

Year of Conference	Place of Conference	Function in Council of EAPS	Function(s) in Conference
1987	Jyväskylä	Executive Secretary	Assistant Secretary
1991	Paris	Executive Secretary	Member Organizing Committee
1995	Milan	Executive Secretary	Member International Organizing Committee
1997	Cracow	Secr. Gen./Treasurer	Member International Organizing Committee
1999	The Hague	Secr. Gen./Treasurer	Secretary International Organizing Committee; Member National Organizing Committee, Chair Executive Committee
2001	Helsinki	Secr. Gen./Treasurer	Member International Organizing Committee
2003	Warsaw	Secr. Gen./Treasurer	Member International Organizing Committee
2006	Liverpool	Vice-President	International Organizing Committee
2008	Barcelona	Vice-President	Member International Organizing Committee
2010	Vienna	--	Member International Organizing Committee
2012	Stockholm	--	Member International Organizing Committee
2014	Budapest	Executive Director	Member International Organizing Committee

Guillaume Wunsch and Charlotte Höhn came to The Hague to effect with me the founding of the European Association for Population Studies (EAPS) I could confidently suggest that we appoint Nico van Nimwegen as the Executive Secretary of the association.

NIDI's board agreed that this task could be made part of his official duties at the Institute, but for him it very quickly became a calling rather than a duty. This first appointment now dates from 30 years ago exactly. During this whole period Nico continued to serve the EAPS in different capacities (*table 1*). His functions ranged from being Executive Secretary in 1983,

to Secretary General and Treasurer, and Vice-President, and back to having a new Executive function as of 2012. All through these years he never complained to me that the organization's resources were inadequate, that the work cost him too much time, or that he had to travel too much. And, whenever I was with him in a group in some out of the way place, he would smilingly guide us to a pub or restaurant where the drinks and food were good and the prices matched our commonly not too generous travel allowances. Nico got along well, extremely well even, with the successive presidents of the EAPS.

More importantly, he played a pivotal role in the organization of 11 European population conferences. It is difficult to overestimate his role in shaping the content and programmes of these conferences. The timely selection of young people as authors, discussants, chairs and conveners is a crucial element in the success of such conferences. For someone who has been present almost continually in the organizational structure of these conferences it is relatively easy to make helpful comments on the best way to achieve a regional balance, on the names of the most promising speakers, on 'hot' themes or topics, and to recall disappointing performances. So, Nico has played an important role in raising the standards at the conferences and in stimulating attendance of those interested in population issues from all the regions of Europe and much further afield.

Model of population

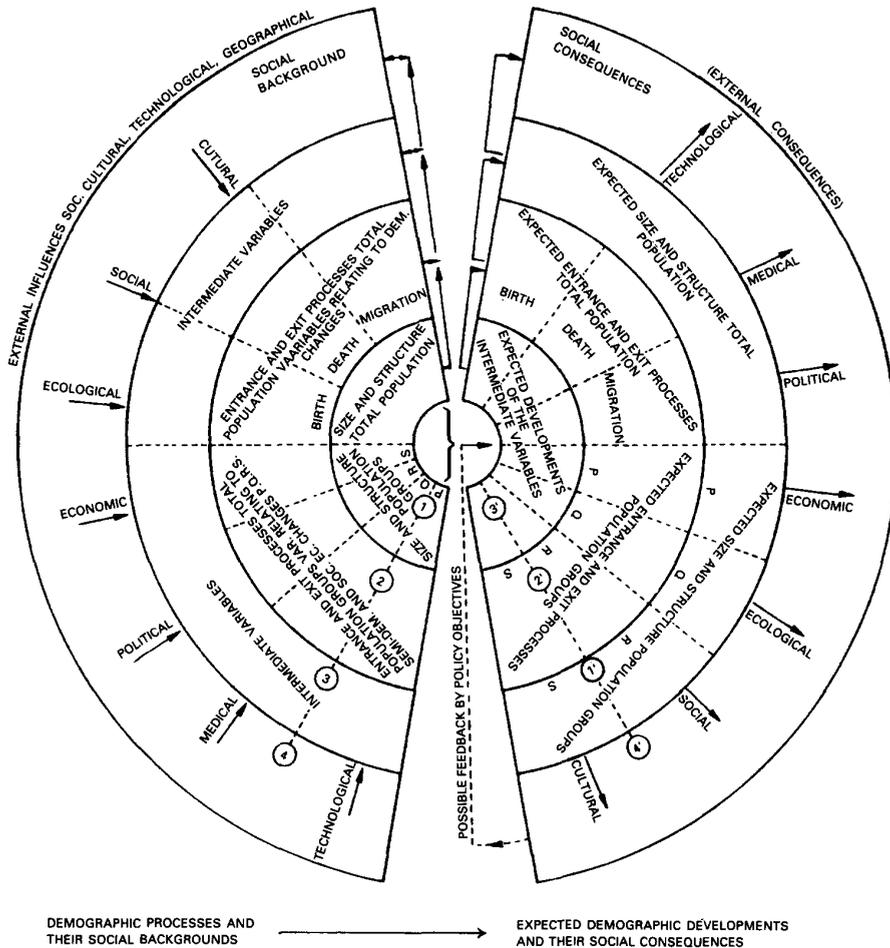
One of the reasons of his success in these functions may well have been the population model he became acquainted with at NIDI. He was not dogmatic about the fields of demography and population studies when he came to the Institute and when he entered his closest colleague was the late Hans van Leusden, the secretary of the Steering Committee of the National Programme. Hans not only was colourful and good company, but also adhered to a model of population research that had been developed at NIDI to structure our work for the *Staatscommissie*.

Its application when drawing up research programmes, or the programmes of scientific conferences, assures that one is unlikely to overlook certain issues. Further it prevents prejudices and one-sided, personal views about what 'demography' really is, from playing a significant role. The figure of the model here included (*figure 1*) shows its emphasis on the processes of entry into and exit from a population, and all sorts of sub-populations, influencing the development of countries or regions.

Focus on societal implications

This approach clearly has also greatly influenced his personal contributions to our field of scholarship. A task which flowed almost naturally from his role in the National Programme was being the chair of a collaborative effort that the Central Bureau of Statistics, the various governmental planning offices, and NIDI had to undertake periodically. This task involved the preparation of a fairly comprehensive report on the state of population in the country. Picking the right topics to be treated, finding the right words to convey their importance, was part of the trick the chair had to perform. And, through skillful planning, people management, and cajoling, where necessary, Nico again and again succeeded in having an interesting

Figure 1. Fields of research and their inter-relationships



Source: Van de Kaa, 1991.

WPRB-report (*Werkverband Periodieke Rapportage Bevolkingsvraagstukken*) published as a consensus document of all the bodies involved. The first report issued in 1984, dealt with a variety of problems and conveyed the significance of governmental actions in these cases. The topics covered included family policies, the consequences of demographic change for collective expenditures, labour supply and education, the demand for health care, and the now even hotter topic: Old age pensions. The tenth and so far last report was published in August 2012 and was entirely devoted to active ageing (Van Nimwegen and Van Praag, 2012). The reports were not meant to provide suggestions or ideas for population policies, but to increase awareness of the significance and implications of the demographic changes taking place.

Most of the 60 or so papers and essays Nico published in the last decade testify to his interest and expertise in population trends in the Netherlands, Europe and at the global level. They document emerging issues in fields such as the development of family relations, the growth of the foreign born population, and the increase in intermarriage. Almost without exception he highlights the societal consequences of the population changes that can be observed and in so doing almost single handedly covered one of the most important tasks NIDI was entrusted with from its inception as a national demographic institute.

Epilogue

It was during the height of the Cold War. The EAPS Council recommended that an ‘official’ visit be brought to the Vice-President of the EAPS, Zdeněk Pavlik, in Prague. So, after participating in a demographic meeting in Germany, Charlotte Höhn, Nico and I set out from Bamberg to travel to Prague. We used my car, an Audi, which as far as I was aware was in good condition. We were kept waiting at the border for hours and hours.

It had become quite dark when we were let through; the road to Prague was narrow, bumpy and unlit. Even so, progress was not too bad until we reached the city. At the time city maps were, of course, unavailable. Navigators using GPS had not even been invented. So, it only was with the help of a kind passer-by that we found the hotel of the Academy in which Pavlik had us booked. To the great dismay of Charlotte and Nico, who had killed time talking about cool, refreshing beer, the bar had long since closed. So they had a ‘Pilsener’ first thing in the morning! The meeting with Pavlik was both informative and fruitful and helped cement the bonds between us. When he saw my Audi, he offered to buy it. I should have accepted for the closer we got to the border on our way back, the worse the engine started to rattle. I didn’t dare turning it off until we had crossed the border: then it conked out for good. It was Sunday night. Even so, a towing truck quickly came to take the car for repair on Monday to a garage in Vohenstrauß. The owner of a small hotel hidden somewhere in the dark fields then turned up with his small car to pick us up. A good meal was prepared without delay. There was plenty of beer in this simple place and Nico impressed me by downing large quantities of it. While dipping his moustache happily in the foam of the *Hefe Weizen* he clearly enjoyed himself. No stress and all smiles. In the true fashion of a born Executive Secretary he must have slept as the proverbial rose.

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