

**Speech by Ank Bijleveld-Schouten,  
State Secretary for the Interior and Kingdom Relations, at  
the opening of the Conference launching the project  
Demographic Change: New Opportunities in a Shrinking  
Europe (DC NOISE),  
Bad Boekelo, 8 October 2008**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was honoured to be asked to open this conference. This region is my home. It is where my political roots are. I am proud that it is participating in the Interreg project DC NOISE. It is a vitally important project about an issue whose significance I, as State Secretary for the Interior and Kingdom Relations, fully appreciate. Unfortunately, population decline has not received politicians' and policymakers' full attention until now. That is why I agreed to act as project ambassador.

This morning, I would like to start by examining the importance of population decline as a policy issue.

*Historical background*

For many decades, population decline in the Netherlands was a marginal issue. In the austere years that followed the Second World War, some rural communities in Groningen and Friesland experienced an exodus of sorts, when many people moved to the cities in the west of the country, or emigrated to Canada or Australia in search of a better life. Some years later,

the urban middle classes went in search of greener pastures, moving to commuter towns and new satellite communities. But the Netherlands has never seen prolonged, substantial population decline in entire regions, as has occurred in rural France and Spain, the north of Sweden or, more recently, former East Germany. And so many Dutch politicians and policymakers still deny or downplay the concept of population decline.

### *Recognition and denial*

I can assure you that the present government does not. We all know that the population in southern Limburg has been declining for years, and that a similar trend has started in regions like northeast Groningen and Zeeland Flanders.

And the government also recognises that the Dutch population as a whole will start to decline after about 2035 – and much earlier in many regions.

The outlines of our policy on population decline are becoming clearer, thanks in part to an advisory report published earlier this year by the Public Administration Council and the Financial Relations Council – two of the Dutch government's advisory councils. Our response to the report, which is almost completed, will also include proposals for policy measures.

All in all, you could say that the reality of population decline is sinking in, and that is a good thing.

A different matter entirely is how we should regard the issue. The mainstream view seems to be that it is a complex problem. I would prefer to look at population decline as an opportunity. The Netherlands has a high population density, which raises its own set of problems. A shrinking population will give us the chance to resolve some of them.

### *Predominance of the growth principle*

And this brings me to my first point. The growth principle seems to rule the hearts and minds of our policymakers. For years, municipal executives concentrated all their efforts on building more business parks, more housing, and improving and increasing public services and infrastructure. They will have to turn their thinking right around and start pursuing completely opposite goals. Believe me, I understand how hard this will be.

Someone once compared this process of adaptation to bereavement. After denial and grief comes acceptance, and only much later can people pick up their lives again. I think this psychological factor plays a crucial role. And that is why it is so important that local and regional executives who have already gone through this process of adaptation provide support and counsel to those who are only at the start of it.

I believe that acknowledging the psychological dimension is a precondition for a successful policy approach .

### *Public services*

Which brings me to the visible impacts of population decline – first of all on public services. In more densely populated areas, serious problems are unlikely to arise. The rate at which services, like the number of primary schools, are cut back will lag slightly behind the rate of population decline, so the costs will still be manageable.

But in sparsely populated areas like rural Friesland, Groningen and Zeeland Flanders, things will be more difficult. What's to be done when the last primary school in the wider area should actually be closed due to lack of pupils? We are thinking now of introducing a hardship clause in order to keep primary schools like this open.

### *Financial relations*

The situation will become less straightforward as more and more Dutch municipalities start to shrink. Given our cost-oriented system of public funding, they are likely to receive relatively larger payments from the Municipalities Fund than those that are still growing. How far will their solidarity go?

I am interested to hear how other countries deal with these dilemmas, and how local and regional levels respond.

### *Spatial effects*

Population decline also has a tangible spatial effect: declining demand for housing, business parks and physical

infrastructure. Perhaps our congestion problems will simply resolve themselves!

In any event, population decline clearly demands a shift in thinking at local and regional level. There will need to be close alignment and cooperation between municipalities. The south Limburg municipalities in the Park City initiative are a good example of this.

### *Job market*

Finally, population decline also affects the job market. Shrinking regions have trouble getting enough qualified workers for certain types of work, mainly in health care. The answer is not for municipalities to compete for the few qualified workers that remain. Instead, they should seek strategic collaboration.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have raised a few issues where population decline could give rise to friction or problems. Obviously, these will need to be resolved. But we should not be so shortsighted as to focus solely on the problems. Population decline also has benefits and may bring new opportunities. If we are freed from the imperative to grow and manage to steer clear of the problems of shrinking, we stand to gain as we are able to invest in quality, a cleaner environment, pleasant places to live, and less congestion. In our densely populated country, less growth is not something to be afraid of.

At the same time, I admit that it won't be easy for government to develop an effective response to population decline. I have already mentioned the important psychological element involved: the predominance of the growth principle. It can be overcome if we learn from each other, if we look beyond national borders, as this project does, and cut across administrative tiers. As a member of the Dutch government, I will be eager to hear about your experiences, especially when the project has been running for a while.

My Ministry will be happy to contribute to the project where possible, especially by sharing knowledge and experience through our knowledge network. But we would also like to be involved in developing strategies to get maximum benefit from population decline.

I wish you all a constructive and pleasant meeting.

Thank you.