

On Wednesday October 8 2008 the kick off was given to the DC NOISE project. More than 75 people from 9 different regions in Europe came to Boekelo-Enschede to be part of the launch of the project Demographic Change: New Opportunities In Shrinking Europe (DC NOISE).

State Secretary for the Dutch Interior and Kingdom Relations, and DC NOISE ambassador Ank Bijleveld-Schouten opened the DC NOISE start conference by stressing the importance of DC NOISE: "It is a vitally important project about an issue whose significance I fully appreciate. Unfortunately, population decline has not received politicians' and policymakers' full attention up to now. 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. [...] The growth principle seems to rule the hearts and minds of our policymakers". She also stressed that adaptation of decline includes a psychological factor and that acknowledging the psychological dimension is a precondition for a successful policy approach.

In sparsely populated areas like rural Friesland, Groningen and Zeeland the consequences of decline are visual. The solutions are not easy to find. What can be done when the last primary school in the wider area should actually be closed due to lack of pupils? The Dutch ministry of the Interior and Kingdom relations is thinking of introducing a hardship clause in order to keep primary schools like this open. According to the DC NOISE ambassador population decline clearly demands a shift in thinking at local and regional level. Cooperation between municipalities is needed. Bijleveld-Schouten: "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."

At the end of her speech Ank Bijleveld-Schouten expressed the wish to contribute to the project, especially by sharing knowledge and experience through the knowledge network and to be involved in developing strategies to get a maximum benefit from population decline.

Karel Loohuis, Mayor of the municipality of Haaksbergen and member of the council of the Region of Twente, Lead Beneficiary of DC NOISE then explains why Twente took the initiative for the DC NOISE project. Twente is facing diminishing growth, and prognoses show a stagnation in 2020. Moreover, there is already a strong trend of ageing, combined with fewer young people, which results in a shrinking labour force. Therefore the Region of Twente decided to raise awareness on the consequences of demographic changes and include many stakeholders in this process to create involved networks. Twente wants to develop different scenarios, based on demographic projections and create an integrated monitoring system and a database. Twente also acknowledges that cooperation with other (declining) regions in the Netherlands and the involvement of national government in the process of finding solutions is very important. Karel expressed how happy Twente is about the cooperation with the 8 other European regions in the DC NOISE project. Working together means a possibility to exchange ideas and best practices and strategies and policies. It helps to bring the subject on the agenda of European, national and regional authorities.

To raise awareness and work on new strategies and solutions for the consequences of demographic change in the different regions Karel explains that each of the partner regions implements demonstration pilots within the field of the labour market, service provision and housing and that together the partners will implement 3 truly transnational pilots on

monitoring, housing and the EU labour market, with the ambitious goal to influence the policy makers on national and EU level.

As an example of how to deal with the consequences of demographic change Bertine Jongerius shows the experiences of Parkstad Limburg, stressing the importance of involving all stakeholders and working together in the process. Her advise to the DC NOISE partners is to accept population decline, anticipate and invest. In Parkstad Limburg the awareness on demographic decline started in 1997: both primary and secondary schools noticed they had fewer new pupils, sports clubs and leisure clubs had the same experiences. Companies found it much more difficult, sometimes almost impossible, to find new employees. The hospitals had much more elderly people to take care of, but had a hard time in finding the employees to take care of these new patients. Jongerius: "So the demographic change was noticeable almost everywhere, but the reactions on it were very different. Many politicians and policy makers believed that as long as we would keep building high quality houses, for a price much lower than in the rest of the Netherlands, people would still be willing to come and live here. These people kept thinking in terms of 'growth'. Accepting the facts was seen as 'giving in', 'not willing to fight for it' and a 'loser's mentality'. This was the biggest and most difficult problem to overcome: how could we change the paradigm, from problem to challenge, and from quantity to quality?"

After the inspiring and very informative presentations Adrian Healy, the chairman of the day, asks the (political) representatives of all the partner regions to take place in the panel and to reflect on the presentations.

Most representatives in the panel agree that the biggest challenge is to raise awareness on the fact that the population is declining. Karel Loohuis, Regio Twente, for example experiences a contradiction. On the one hand demographic change is accepted, but at the same time building plans are still implemented as if the region is growing. Repetition is important: telling over and over again. Koen van Bremen, formerly working on demographic change for the region of Twente expresses his concern that very often politicians say they accept the demographic change but as soon as they search for solutions they rely on competitive strategies.

Harry van Waveren, province of Zeeland, stresses the importance of involving the inhabitants of your region. Zeeland is organising bottom-up conferences to inform and exchange experiences with the inhabitants. David Blackwood, Dundee, has experience with this, since Dundee deals with population decline for the past 30 years! The closing of schools is upsetting inhabitants. It's important to focus on quality in your policies and communicate well about the intentions of maintaining the quality of life. The key issue here is that you need new and different solutions to different problems, which includes the demolishing of houses to build higher quality houses for the right groups.

According to Wilhelm Schulte, City of Hamburg, it is all about the paradigm shift from quantity to quality, from thinking in growth to thinking in decline. To raise public awareness Richard Eckermann, Bremen, tells about a survey in each of the municipalities in the Bremen region, with the aim to find out where to invest and where not. Choices have to be made and in each case different social groups must be included.

Mrs. Bieke Bouciqué, province of West-Flanders, amplifies that in West-Flanders the results of the studies on population development are distributed on all levels to raise awareness about the consequences of demographic change.

Mrs. Mette Gundersen, Knutepunkt Sørlandet, thinks that family planning is still an important way of slowing down the population decline. The average birth rate in Norway is slightly higher than in the rest of Europe and Mrs. Gundersen claims that this is also because of the family friendly policies, which makes it attractive (for both mothers and fathers) to combine having children with a career.

Although the other partners are not convinced and claim that many women decide on different grounds, Pascal de Meyer, East-Flanders would like to stress the importance of

cooperation with all the other DC NOISE partners to find solutions and new approaches to dealing with the challenges with regard to demographic changes. In that respect Karel Loohuis, Regio Twente, says that the help of the national authorities is needed as well. For example, to deal with the difficult financial situation of regions in decline new financial arrangements should be established. Richard Eckermann, Bremen, acknowledges that it is also worthwhile to make a calculation of what the demographic decline will actually cost. On that basis it might be easier to show what action is needed and why. Mrs. Mette Gundersen, Knutepunkt Sørlandet can underline the active approach that is needed: “we are shrinking, not sinking!”

Then it is time for Karel Loohuis, as representative of the lead beneficiary of DC NOISE, the Region of Twente, to launch the DC NOISE website as one of the instruments to share and exchange knowledge about demographic change and how to deal with the consequences of that. Have a look at WWW.DCNOISE.EU!!

To strengthen the commitment of all 9 partners in the DC NOISE project, Roos Galjaard, the transnational project manager asks all the partners to sign the partner agreement for the coming 3 years.

The afternoon contains discussion in much smaller groups in 4 different workshops. Each of the workshops tackled extremely important dimensions of the challenge facing us:

- the housing challenge
- the productivity challenge facing the labour market
- the monitoring challenge
- the communications challenge

At the end of the day Adrian Healy draws up some key messages from the start conference:

Firstly, is the nature of the demographic issue facing us. Namely a declining population and an increasing proportion of elderly residents. The speed of this decline in some areas, and the rapidity with which stagnant population growth is approaching in others, is particularly notable.

Secondly, is the importance of winning the 'psychological' battle. It is important to stress that planning for decline, or for 'shrink', is not 'giving up' but is a positive approach.

Thirdly, even with a willingness to act, to actually take action is challenging. It is challenging because it involves hard choices – which school to close, which houses to demolish – and because the financial resources for this are limited (and actually reduce as the population reduces).

What today has clearly demonstrated is the need to prioritise. The importance of selecting, and then concentrating on, a limited number of themes. This is the approach that DC NOISE is taking. Today has also demonstrated the importance of monitoring within this, so we know precisely what the nature of the problem is, and how we are dealing with it.

The workshops demonstrated that there is no one answer, because there is no single problem. But they also demonstrated that by working together we can raise awareness, and understanding, of the possible responses. And we can raise the profile of the issues to encourage more concerted actions, particularly at a national level.

Three other points that were taken away from the discussions are:

- The importance of having political support
- The need for cross-departmental working, both within and between authorities, and
- The importance of learning from others and the value of having national-level support

Finally, certain phrases that seem to summarise the day very neatly:

- Act, don't react
- It's quality not quantity
- A chance, not a disaster
- Co-operation not competition

Transnational project manager of DC NOISE, Roos Galjaard, closes the start conference by telling about the expected first results coming up: the DC-Test, which aims to make policies demographic change proof. It aims to help the authorities to adapt their policies towards de demographic changes, like ageing and population decline.

Roos also mentions the importance of the use of the website and linked to that the use of intranet. Those interested in joining the discussions on the intranet may get in contact with the official partner of their region and ask for a password to get access to this intranet.

In the mean time the pilots will be running full speed. The first results of that will be showed to a broad audience during the midterm conference in Hamburg, in February 2010.

The kick off of DC NOISE seems to have been fruitful to us all and is a promising start for the coming three years!