

Population lecture series – 22 October 2009

Title: Population, Livelihood and Environment.

On 22 October, about 50 participants gathered at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, for the fifth WPF Population Lecture Series. This evening, participants were able to look into a very specific, but most interesting population case, that of China. Professor Xizhe Peng of the School of Social Development and Public Policy, Fudan University, interestingly talked about the population dynamics in his home country, and the policies of China that address these, and the impact on China's development.

China's present population is 1328.02 million, and each year there are 16 million births and 9 million deaths, which implies a growing population. Some of the main dynamics that occur from it are urbanization, aging population and unequal dispersed settlements, the most populated areas are at the coast which is just a small part of the country, while rural people are dispersed in the bigger rest of the country. Shanghai women get as old as 85 years, while the average life expectancy of women is 72. Professor Peng argued that reproductive behavior is linked to socio-economic development: for example in when the national family planning policy was implemented in the early 1970s, fertility declined rapidly in rural areas. However, in urban areas this process had already begun before implementing the family planning policies. Nowadays, in Shanghai the fertility rate is 0.7, whereas in Tibet and other remote areas women get sometimes up to 3.5 children on average.

Everyone knows China of its one child policy. Mr Peng was able to bring some nuances in this controversial debate. The one-child policy applies to urban settings, and some rural settings only, and in most cases (almost 52% of the cases), people can have two children when the first one is a girl. This is proposed as a security for the family, a 'compromise to the reality', as Dr. Peng explained. In some cases two children are allowed when there is a four-year spacing policy. Dr. Peng acknowledges that these child policies are controversial and conflicting with the rights based approach. He however explains that the government of China thought of counter measures to empower the girl, eg by having subsidies for families only having girls. Today, the sex ratio in China is 120 boys to 100 girls and this has been growing since 1982. Negative effects are marriage squeeze, and pressure on family patterns, social stability, and future population growth.

Another major challenge in China is the aging population. China has the largest elderly population in the world. Dr. Peng acknowledges that there is little room for further reduction of family size and he supports the right of people to choose about family size themselves, but he nevertheless pleads for the need to slow down absolute population increase. As the aging population, climate change pressures and the widening gap between rural and urban are China's current demographic challenges.

Dr. Jeroen van Ginneken of NIDI commented on Dr. Peng's speech by stating that China's current population dynamics is about stresses and strains. China tries to meet the raising standards of living in the country by investing in huge projects like mega projects in wind and solar energy, importing raw materials for the Chinese economy and mega projects on water supply, eg the south-north water river diversion scheme.

There was quite some time to let the audience respond and ask questions. The audience consisted of many students from different countries, professionals of population centres, NGOs and government. The focus of the debate was mainly on the issue of gender equality, discrimination of the girl child and the right to choose.