Views on overpopulation in the Netherlands

An ethical analysis of the population policies in the Dutch election manifestos

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Figure 1: Overbevolking (De Jager, 2018)

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Summary

Population growth is one of the main contributors to climate change. Next to climate change, overpopulation leads to more environmental and societal problems, such as biodiversity loss, land degradation and growing hunger. However, policies to limit population growth or reduce overpopulation are scarce. Most policies related to the issue are end-of-pipe solutions that aim to limit the consequences of overpopulation rather than the issue itself.

This research aims to explain this trend in policies for the Netherlands, as it is one of the most densely populated countries of the developed world. This is done by conducting two research methods. First, a text analysis of the 2021 election manifestos of the Dutch political parties was conducted. In these manifestos, the parties present their societal views and policy proposals in the run-up to the elections of the House of Representatives in March 2021.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews with experts in combination with a philosophical analysis, mainly focused on the concept of the moral circle, were used to give recommendations on the policy proposals of the parties.

It became clear from the text analysis that although most political parties acknowledge the issue of overpopulation, they only propose solutions to deal with the consequences of overpopulation. Overpopulation is only addressed directly in the form of immigration, which is mainly because of the cultural and economic aspects instead of the ecological aspects.

According to the theory of green liberalism, non-human animals should also be taken into account in addressing overpopulation. The research shows that there is a problematic overpopulation of farm animals, both from an ecological and an ethical perspective. There is some mentioning of this form of overpopulation in the manifestos, but mostly focused on the ecological part. From the interviews, it became clear that intervening directly in population growth is extremely difficult and undesirable, because limiting reproduction is experienced as a violation of human rights. Indirect measures to limit human overpopulation are therefore preferred. Finally, according to the interviewed experts, there are effective measures to be taken that address the immigration aspect of overpopulation, in the form of development aid and family planning programs.

1. Introduction

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), population growth is one of the two main drivers of climate change through increasing global greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2018). A higher population entails more greenhouse gas emissions, which means more people will be vulnerable to climate-related impacts as the Earth's resources are being depleted more rapidly. Therefore, overpopulation is a large concern for climate policy. However, climate change is not the only issue aggravated by overpopulation. The ecological crisis caused by overpopulation is many-sided. Farmland is being used more intensively which causes the degradation of these lands (Fischer et al., 2012). Because of this, natural habitats are being destroyed and biodiversity is declining in an alarming rate (Reumer, 2020). Growing populations in mainly urban regions is exceeding the capacity of a lot of cities to guarantee adequate services for citizens (Cohen, 2006). Cases of food shortages are increasing along with the rapid growth in human population numbers (Pimentel, 2012). These kinds of developments also intensify pollution and disease problems, which are of great health concern as epidemics are expected to develop more frequently (Pimentel et al., 2007). Slowing down population growth or even reducing population size could put a halt to these environmental problems and therefore be an effective way to mitigate climate change. Continuing on a path of harmful population growth also presents a catastrophe of ethical nature. Increasing appropriation of resources by a growing world population will lead to a growing inability of future generation to sustain their own livelihoods. Yet population policy has attracted relatively little attention from ethicists, policy analysts, or policy makers dealing with this issue (Cafaro, 2012; Kopnina & Washington, 2016). This is partly because addressing population growth means wading into a plethora of contentious ethical issues, including abortion, government interference in family planning and anti-immigration policies.

Another problem with the discussion on population control, is that the attention often is aimed at countries in Asia and Africa (Monbiot, 2020). This is because these are the regions where the largest surges in population occur (Mountford & Rapoport, 2015). Therefore, it is often regarded as a problem for these regions and developing countries only. However, consumption of resources and the corresponding CO_2 emissions are very unevenly distributed. The richest one percent of the world population emits twice as much CO_2 as the poorest half of the population (Meesterburrie, 2020).

For these reasons, it is that governance on population control hasn't received a lot of attention in countries such as the Netherlands in dealing with climate change. Also, the

Netherlands is the most densely populated country in Europe of the countries with more than one million citizens, thus excluding microstates (Whelan, 2020). Moreover, the population size of the Netherlands is expected to continue to grow in the coming years, from a current 17,5 million to 19 million in 2039 (Statistics Netherlands, 2019). Already back in 1979, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands said during the yearly Speech of the Throne: "Our country is full, partly overfull" (Troonrede, 1979). Since that statement, the population of the Netherlands has only gotten larger. However, after this statement, not much has been done to deal with this population growth. This raises the question whether the Dutch government should adopt stricter policies on population control. On the 17th of March 2021, in the Netherlands, the elections of the House of Representatives will take place. All the political parties are preparing for these elections. They do this by presenting their election manifesto to the public, which contains their views on a variety of societal problems, objectives and policy proposals. An analysis of these manifestos will give an overview of proposed policies on population control and the way they view the issue of overpopulation, if they even pay attention to it at all. Therefore, the following research question will function as the starting point for this thesis:

In what way do the Dutch political parties propose to deal with overpopulation?

The main objective of this research is to investigate the proposed practices of population control in the Netherlands and make a normative evaluation of these policies. The basis for the normative evaluation will come from the ethical theories of environmental ethics and the moral circle of concern, in which special attention is being paid to future generations and animals. Therefore, the research also aims to assess animal overpopulation and corresponding policies. Moreover, semi-structured interviews with relevant experts will serve as input for the normative evaluation as well. The aim of this research is to see whether there is room for improvement in these proposed policies and give recommendations. Subsequently, these improvements can contribute to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), especially SDG 1: no poverty, SDG 2: zero hunger and SDG 10: reduced inequalities.

2. Theory and key concepts

2.1   Sustainable population growth and population size

Population growth in itself is not necessarily a bad development. Since humans started to roam the Earth, about 12.000 years ago, the world population has been growing[1], although very slowly. However, most of this growth has happened quite recently. It took up to until 1800 for the world population to reach 1 billion. In a little more than 200 years, the world population surged drastically. After ages of small linear growth, population size increased exponentially, up to 7 billion, as can be seen in figure 1. This trend is also known as the Great Acceleration, which encompasses the surge in the growth rate of a wide range of human activities of both socio-economic and biophysical nature, first recorded in the mid-20th century and continuing to this day (Steffen et al., 2015).
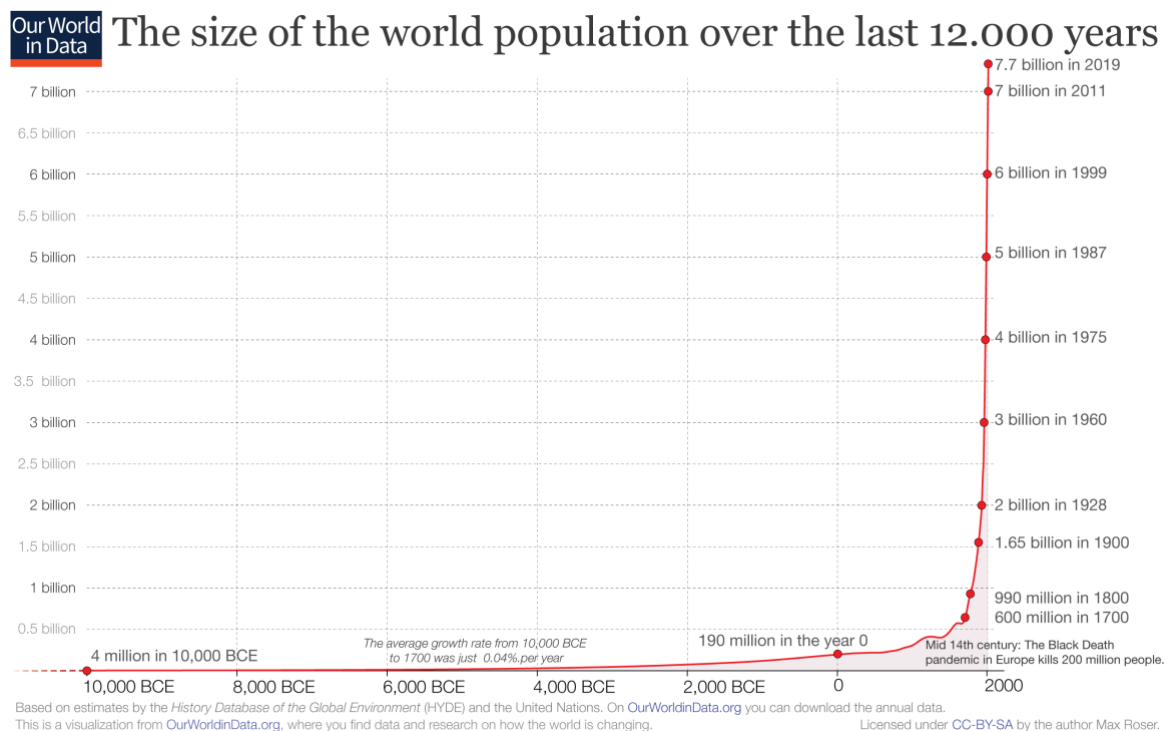
Figure 2: The size of the world population over the last 12.000 years (Our World in Data, 2013)

Population size is expected to grow even more in the coming decades, according to the UN (Roser, 2013). Population size is estimated to be around 10,88 billion in 2100, as can be seen

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[1] The only time in history when there was a decrease in human population, was in the 14th century, when the Black Death killed up to 75-200 million people, reducing the world population from an estimated 475 million to 350–375 million (US Census Bureau, 2018).

in figure 2. In their report *The Limits to Growth* (1972), the Club of Rome already warned that our global system of nature probably cannot support these growth rates.
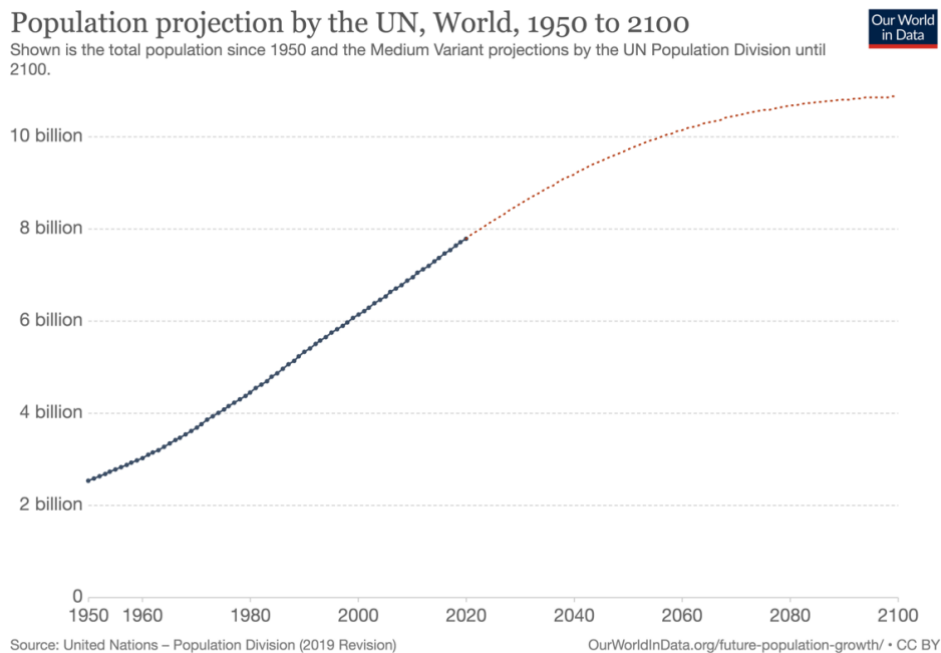

Population projection by the UN, World, 1950 to 2100
Shown is the total population since 1950 and the Medium Variant projections by the UN Population Division until 2100.

Figure 3: Population projection of the world by the UN (Our World in Data, 2014)

The problem with population growth, is that the current number of people living on the Earth is so large that it puts an increasing pressure on the Earth's resources, contributes to climate change and forms a risk for environmental sustainability (Scovronick et al., 2017). When this is the case, we speak of overpopulation. The dramatic rise in population numbers started around 1950 along with the increased food production as a result of the industrialization of agriculture (Steffen et al., 2015). A few decades later, it has become apparent that this growth of the world population had led to many environmental problems and now forms one of the main challenges for sustainable development.

Sustainable development is often defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). Following this line of thought, population can only be allowed to grow to the extent that future generations won't be compromised through this growth.

According to some, such as the Deep Ecology movement founded by philosopher Arne Næss, the world population already passed the point of a sustainable population size. Therefore, the population size should decrease to be sustainable (Næss, 1988).

More locally, in the Netherlands, there is also a group called 'The Ten Million Club', that calls for a reduction of the Dutch population to at least ten million, which implies a decrease of seven million people (De Club van Tien Miljoen, 2020). They believe this is necessary to reduce the excessive exploitation and pollution of both the Netherlands and the countries the Dutch population import their goods from.

When looking at the population numbers of the Netherlands, as shown in figure 3, a clear increase in the population can be seen as well. According to the CBS, the Dutch national statistical office, the population is projected to continue to grow in the coming years (Statistics Netherlands, 2019). The question now remains whether this expected amount of the Dutch population can be called sustainable and if stricter policies on population control need to be adopted.
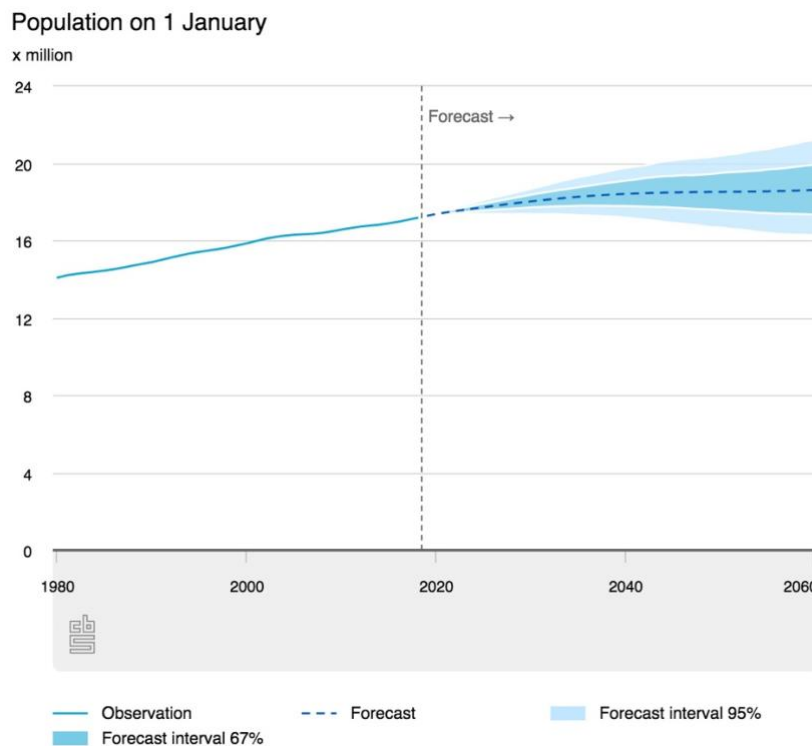
Figure 4: Population in the Netherlands including forecast (Statistics Netherlands, 2019)

2.2   Sustainable Development Goals

The issue of population growth is strongly related to some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). The SDG's were formulated during the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. At this summit, all of the UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with at its core, the 17 SDG's (UN, n.d.). These SDG's

are aimed at ending poverty, improving health and education, reducing inequalities and spur economic growth, while also preserving nature and combating climate change. These goals aim to ensure a liveable world for current and future generations.

In different ways, the issue of population growth is related to many of the SDG's, some more than others. First of all, there are limits to the amount of people the Earth can feed and provide resources for. Therefore, it is of great importance to keep population growth within boundaries, in order to reach the first and second SDG: no poverty and zero hunger. Also, management of population growth is related to reducing inequalities between people in developed countries and people in developing countries, which is the target of the tenth SDG. The issue of overpopulation is not only related to inequalities between countries, but also between different generations and between humans and non-human animals. However, these two forms of inequalities are not explicitly addressed by SDG 10.

While all of these SDG's can be linked to the issue of population growth, there is no SDG that explicitly calls for limiting population growth as one of its targets (UN, n.d.), even though, as already has been stated by the IPCC, overpopulation is one of the main drivers of climate change. The absence can be explained by the controversy surrounding the issue (Cafaro, 2012).

Figure 5: SDG 1: No poverty, SDG 2: Zero hunger, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities

2.3   Population control policies

Measures to deal with population growth can be divided into two groups: coercive measures and noncoercive measures. Noncoercive measures include: sexual education, providing low-cost birth control, accessible information on family planning (Cafaro, 2012). Coercive measures include: sterilization, forced abortion or the infamous one-child policy enforced in China. This policy made having a second child illegal by law, which can be regarded as the most draconian form of government interfering in population growth ever seen (Feng et al.,

2013). Noncoercive measures give more reproductive freedom to people than coercive measures. In practice, a distinction between coercive and noncoercive measures can't always be made easily (Stone, 2012). For example, an extremely large fine for a second child can be regarded as noncoercive, but be experienced as severely coercive to some people.

There is often discussion on the question whether coercive population policies can ever be morally justified, as reproduction is so closely connected with the human nature (Cafaro, 2012). John Stuart Mill, famous philosopher and economist, gives in his influential work *On Liberty* an argument that justifies coercive population control (Mill, 1859). He states:

> And in a country either overpeopled, or threatened with being so, to produce children, beyond a very small number, with the effect of reducing the reward of labor by their competition, is a serious offense against all who live by the remuneration of their labor (p. 110).

Mills focus is here rather economical than ecological, but the core idea remains the same. He understands that we live in a world with limited resources and necessary trade-offs in which individuals sometimes have to sacrifice something for the common good (Cafaro, 2012). This statement can be seen as somewhat surprising coming from one of the most famous proponents of individual liberty. However, Mill recognizes that rights are justified by human flourishing. When this flourishing is being undermined by the execution of certain rights, such as reproducing with overpopulation as a result, these rights should sometimes be curtailed.

2.4   Dutch election manifestos 2021

One of the most important elections in the Netherlands, is the election of House of Representatives, which is the lower house of the Dutch bicameral parliament. These elections occur every four years. In the House of Representatives, discussion of proposed legislation takes place. The House has 150 seats, which are filled through elections based on equal distribution. These elections follow the principal of party-list proportional representation. In anticipation of the elections of the House of Representatives in the Netherlands on the 17th of March 2021, all the political parties that want to take part in these elections, present their election manifesto. In this manifesto, they formulate their views on societal problems and

present goals and objectives for dealing with these problems. These election manifestos are publicly available and play an important role during the elections as they are often discussed and scrutinized by journalists, experts and interest groups. After the elections, the parties that have formed a coalition and thus form a majority (75+ seats) in the Parliament, try to get as many of the parts of their election manifestos into the coalition agreement. The coalition agreement contains the most important goals and policy plans of the new cabinet.

2.5 Environmental ethics and the ecological footprint

Ethics is a branch in philosophy that deals with questions about what is right or wrong (Fieser, n.d.). Within the field of ethics, there are a lot of applied forms of ethics. One of these applied forms is environmental ethics. Environmental ethics concerns the relation between humans and the natural world (Attfield, 2018). While this area of ethics is relatively young, it has become highly relevant in the past few decades, as the effect of human practices on the environment have become increasingly apparent. Overpopulation is one of these causes that have a harmful impact on the natural world. Therefore, the matter of overpopulation is of great importance in environmental ethics.

Not only the number of people determine the degree of harmful impact on the Earth, but also the ecological footprint of these people. The ecological footprint clearly illustrates the unjustified assumption that population growth is mainly an issue of developing countries, as the population growth is the largest in these countries. While this may very well be the case, the ecological footprint of people from developing countries is much smaller than the footprint of people living in developed countries, as people from developed countries live in greater affluence. This issue is often illustrated through the I=PAT-equation, which states that environmental impact (I) is the product of three factors: population (P), affluence (A) and technological inefficiency (T) (Holdren & Ehrlich, 1974).

$$I = P \times A \times T$$

This also means that our combined ecological footprint, which is the total number of people (P) x the average ecological footprint ($\overline{EF}$), has to be smaller than the carrying capacity of the Earth, in order to live sustainably (Van den Berg, 2012).

$$P \times \overline{EF} < CC$$

2.6   Expanding the moral circle

The rights and values of future generations are often overlooked in the classical understanding of liberalism. Also in policy making is this an issue. Laws and policies pay more attention to the needs of current generations than those of future generations, a bias which is called presentism (Thompson, 2010). It may seem difficult to assign rights to future generations, as they are non-existent. On the other hand, they are a group of to-be-existent individuals that will be influenced by current decisions and policies. The effects of policies on population growth are for a large part experienced by future generations as these are long-term effects. After all, policies that are implemented now have influence on the amount and composition of the population in the future (Méjean et al., 2020). Therefore, an expansion of the so called moral circle is needed (Figure 5). The concept of the moral circle was first coined by the Irish historian W.E.H. Lecky (1869). The moral circle forms the boundary of the entities that are deemed worthy of moral consideration (Laham, 2009).

In classical liberalism, the moral circle is quite anthropocentric and focussed on humans and present generations. According to green liberalism, non-human animals and future generations should be included as well as they are groups of sentient beings that are capable of suffering (Van den Berg, 2012). Also the inclusion of animals has implications on our view on overpopulation issues. Just as overpopulation can be conceived of as too much people occupying a certain area, the same can be said regarding animals. Besides, human overpopulation and animal overpopulation are related. Overpopulation of humans on the one hand endangers the habitats of wild animals, causing their numbers to decline. On the other hand, a growing number of people go hand in hand with a growing number of farm animals (Reumer, 2020). Humans use these animals as resources and therefore more people will also create more animals. Ethicist Stijn Bruers also includes animals in his views on overpopulation and even states that the real problem doesn't lie with human overpopulation but with animal population (Bruers, interview).
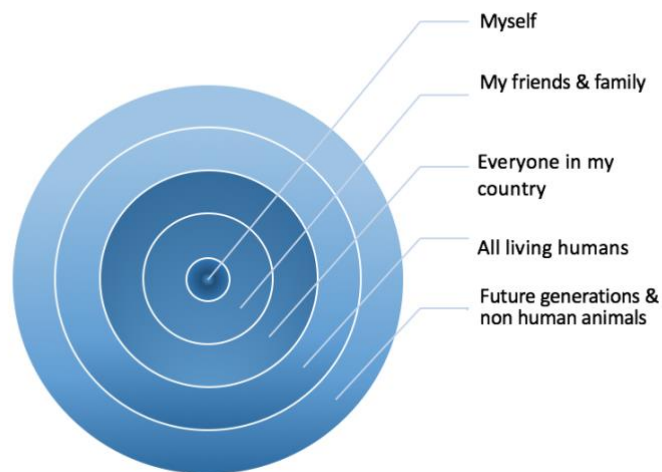
Figure 6: Sentientism: To whom should we apply ethics? Expanding the moral circle: (Ethics poster, Floris van den Berg, 2012)

2.7 Relation between key concepts

All of the discussed concepts and theories can be connected to illustrate the issue of overpopulation, as can be seen in figure 5. The ideas from the philosophical theories of environmental ethics and future generation ethics are connected to policies on population control through the moral circle together with the SDG's. The election manifestos and the interviews with the experts form the bridge between the policies and the goal of sustainable population growth and population size, as the aim of this research is to investigate whether the election manifestos contain policies on population control that aim to reach that degree of sustainability.
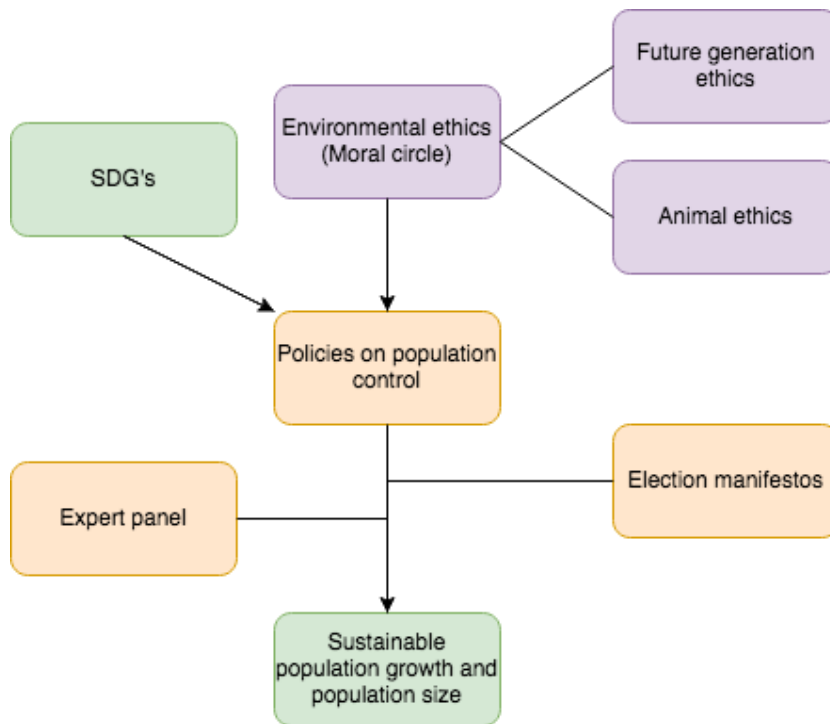
Figure 7: Conceptual framework

3. Methods

To obtain the data necessary to answer the research question, two methods will be used. First, a text analysis of the election manifestos will form the empirical data. Second, semi-structured interviews with some relevant experts will provide information in order to make a normative evaluation of proposed policies on population control and give recommendations.

3.1   Analysis of election manifestos about population policies

The election manifestos of the Dutch election 2021 of the House of Representatives will be analysed. An analysis of these election manifestos will yield an overview of the opinions and proposed policies of the thirteen Dutch political parties on the issue of population control.

While immigration and immigration policies can be linked to climate issues, they will only be discussed insofar as they explicitly aim to deal with climate change. Even though debate on immigration is ubiquitous in today's Dutch politics, the relationship with ecological aspects, such as climate change and the ecological footprint, remains underexposed and it is this relationship between population and environmental problems what this research aims to investigate. The topical character of the election manifestos makes them extremely useful to investigate the current position of population growth in today's politics. These manifestos will form the main part of the empirical data necessary to answer the research question.

Leading up to the election of the House of Representatives, there are a lot of parties that present an election manifesto. For reasons of time and efficiency, a selection of political parties is made of which the election manifesto will be taken up in the analysis. The parties that will be analysed, are the parties that have been represented in the House of Representatives over the past four years, thus since the previous elections. These parties are listed in table 1 (listed by the number of seats they received during the previous elections of 2017).

Political party	Meaning	Ideology	Political position
VVD	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*)	Conservative liberalism Economic liberalism	Centre-right
PVV	Party for the Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*)	Right-wing populism Nationalism	Right-wing to far-right
CDA	Christian Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*)	Christian democracy Social conservatism	Centre to centre-right
D66	Democrats 66 (*Democraten 66*)	Social liberalism Progressivism Republicanism	Centre
GroenLinks	GreenLeft (*GroenLinks*)	Green politics Social democracy	Centre-left to left-wing
SP	Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*)	Democratic socialism Social democracy Left-wing populism	Left-wing
PvdA	Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*)	Social democracy Social liberalism Third way	Centre-left
CU	Christian Union (*ChristenUnie*)	Christian democracy Social conservatism Social Christianity	Centre to centre-right
PvdD	Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren*)	Animal rights Animal welfare Environmentalism	Left-wing
50+	50PLUS (*50PLUS*)	Pensioners' interests Identity politics Populism	Centre
SGP	Reformed Political Party (*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij*)	Christian right Social conservatism	Right-wing
DENK	DENK (*DENK*)	Identity politics Minority rights Left-wing populism	Centre-left
FvD	Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*)	National conservatism Fiscal conservatism Direct democracy Right-wing populism	Right-wing to far-right

Table 1: List of political parties represented in the House of Representatives from 2017-2021 (Wikipedia)

These parties have been chosen because of two reasons. First of all, because these parties are represented in the House of Representatives, they give the best representation of the current Dutch political scene. Secondly, these are also the parties that are expected to be in the House of Representatives after the following elections as well, according to the major poll organisations Peil.nl, I&O Research and EenVandaag (Hond, 2020; Wiegman, 2020; EenVandaag, 2020). This means that their election manifestos and thus their proposed policies will most likely influence legislation in the coming years. Therefore, an analysis of these parties will yield the most accurate prediction of future policies. The election manifestos will be analysed by using open coding.

3.2 Expert panel on population issues and policies

Semi-structured interviews with four relevant experts will be used to tackle the normative aspect of the research question, whether the Dutch parties should formulate policies on population growth with respect to climate change mitigation and if so, how strict these policies should be. The generated insights from these interviews can help to better understand why and how certain policies are being formulated or not and also give advice and provide direction for future policy development (Varvasovszky & Brugha, 2000). For the interviews, a selection of relevant experts has been made. The experts have been selected based on their knowledge and expertise with the topic of overpopulation. The experts are listed in table 2.

Name	Function
Prof. Dr. Jelle Reumer	Biologist at UU and author of the book '*Teveel*' *('Too many')*
Dr. Jan van Weeren	Secretary of the Dutch NGO 'The Ten Million Club'
Dr. Ton van Rietbergen	Economic geographer, UU
Dr. Stijn Bruers	Environmental philosopher

Table 2: List of experts and their functions and work fields

The questions asked in these interviews are aimed at obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of overpopulation. The experts are being asked what their definition of overpopulations is and whether they believe there is a problem of overpopulation, both on a

global level and on a national level. They were also asked whether this is an issue the government should deal with and how. Attention was also paid at limitations in policies, thus explaining these limitations and discussing possible ways to overcome these limitations and find possible alternatives.

4. Results

This section contains the results of the text analysis, the semi-structured interviews with the experts and the scientific literature review. First, an overview of the election manifestos will be given. Second, the interviews with the experts will be discussed.

4.1   Analysis of the election manifestos

Table 3 provides an overview of the Dutch political parties and the way in which overpopulation is being addressed in their election manifestos. Four forms of mentioning are being distinguished. First of all, it was investigated whether a party does address overpopulation at all. Secondly, it was investigated whether it puts the issue in a national or international perspective, or both. Thirdly, it was investigated in what way overpopulation poses a problem according to the party. Finally, it was investigated whether the party proposes solutions to deal with the issue of overpopulation and in what way. These were the initial dimensions that were being analysed and after the interview with Bruers, a second analysis of the manifestos was conducted in which the mention of measures to limit animal overpopulation was analysed as well.

Political party	Mention of human overpopulation	Mention of animal overpopulation	Places issue in national or international perspective	Framing of issue	Mention of measures to limit human overpopulation	Mention of measures to limit animal overpopulation	Special remarks
VVD	Yes	No	International	Cause of immigration Cause of growing demand for food	No	n/a	
PVV	Yes	No	National	Result of immigration	Yes, limiting immigration	n/a	The only party that uses the word 'overpopulation' (*overbevolking*) in its election manifesto
CDA	Yes	No	Both	Cause of immigration Result of immigration Cause of growing demand for food	No	n/a	
D66	Yes	Yes	Both	Cause of growing demand for food (human) Problem for reaching the goals of the Paris agreement (animal)	No	Yes	
GroenLinks	No	Yes	National	Unsustainable for climate, human health and animal wellbeing	n/a	Yes	
SP	No	No	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
PvdA	Yes	Yes	Both	Cause of depletion of Earth's resources (human) Contributes to the nitrogen crisis (animal)	No	Yes	
CU	Yes	Yes	International	Cause of depletion of Earth's resources (human) Cause of farmland degradation and biodiversity loss (animal)	No	Yes	
PvdD	Yes	Yes	National	Cause of growing demand of housing through immigration (human) Unsustainable for climate, nature and animal wellbeing	No	Yes	
50+	No	No	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
SGP	Yes	No	National	Cause of disbalance between the native Dutch population and immigrants	No	n/a	Wants to promote population growth of the native Dutch population
DENK	No	No	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
FvD	Yes	No	National	Result of immigration	Yes, limiting immigration	n/a	

Table 3: Overview of the political parties and their views on overpopulation

After looking at the table, several remarks can be made regarding the different dimensions of mentioning the issue of overpopulation. First of all, when solely looking if overpopulation is mentioned, only a small majority of the election manifestos do mention it. Measured overall, there is a more or less equal amount of attention being paid to both overpopulation on an international scale and on a national scale.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways the parties frame the issue of overpopulation, the first being related to immigration issues and the second to growing demands, of food, housing or resources in general. The difference between these two framings is that in the case of immigration, some parties propose to limit the overpopulation itself, while in the case of growing demands, not overpopulation itself, but its consequences are addressed. It should be noted that immigration and growing demands are not two separated independent issues, but are of course closely connected. However, for the political parties it does matter how they frame these issues, as different framings entail different solutions (Stone, 2012).

Because of the different implications of framing overpopulation in terms of immigration or in terms of growing demands, the only parties that propose measures to limit overpopulation itself, are the PVV and FvD, in the form of curtailing immigration, but this is mostly because of the cultural and social aspects of immigration and not so much the ecological aspects. For example, the PVV differentiates proposed immigration policy and only wants to make immigration from Islamic countries entirely illegal. The SGP also addresses overpopulation in terms of tensions between the Dutch population and immigrants, because the number of immigrants increases and the number of the native Dutch people decreases. Interestingly enough, this results in the SGP even proposing to promote population growth of the Dutch people through economic support of Dutch families.

There are five parties that propose to limit animal overpopulation, which is interestingly more than the amount of parties that propose to limit human overpopulation. These five parties do this by talking about halving or reducing the number of livestock. In most of these cases, the livestock is being connected to climate change or the nitrogen crisis. Only the PvdD and Groenlinks also give ethical arguments for reducing the number of livestock, in which the wellbeing of animals is taken into account.

4.2   Results and findings of interviews with experts

In this section, the insights and opinions of the different experts on the issue of overpopulation are being discussed.

In table 3 can be seen that the parties haven't proposed any measures to limit overpopulation. According to Jan van Weeren of the Ten Million Club, this is because no political gain can be achieved by talking about overpopulation (Van Weeren, interview). For the Christian parties, this is because (large) families are the cornerstone of a society. According to the left parties, having children is one of the most fundamental human rights. Neoliberal parties see humans as consumers and workers that are crucial for the economy. Parties on the right do have trouble with immigration, but as has been said before, this is for other reasons than the ecological consequences. Because of this, other more moderate and left parties are hesitant to make the connection between immigration and overpopulation, according to Van Veeren. He adds to this that the Ten Million Club also has received allegations of being racist when they made this connection. Among other things, this contributed to the shift of the organisation towards a more neutral position in the debate. This makes the controversy surrounding this connection painfully clear.

According to Ton van Rietbergen, to reduce population numbers, to intervene in demographic developments is extremely difficult. This fact is also being endorsed by the scientific literature (Cafaro, 2012). Whether there is an issue of overpopulation also depends on the perspective you take, Van Rietbergen says. The biologist or ecologist may see a problem in overpopulation, because ecosystems are being damaged. However, the economist may see a solution in overpopulation as the aging of the Dutch population demands a larger working class. Van Rietbergen also states that population growth in Africa may even compensate the declining population elsewhere in the world. Moreover, Van Rietbergen believes that much more gain can be achieved by dealing with overconsumption or the negative consequences of overconsumption, for example through taxations and improve technological inefficiency, which are the two other factors in the IPAT-equation next to population that determine the ecological impact.

In his book *Teveel* (2020), Jelle Reumer shows that overpopulation contributes to a great extent to different environmental problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss and overfishing. Therefore, he believes that overpopulation is a serious problem that should be addressed. However, he also acknowledges that limiting population growth is a strenuous domain for policy making. Reumer therefore beliefs that people should be made aware of the issue in order for them to make a responsible decision regarding having children. The

measures the government then can take, should not be as coercive as prohibiting child birth, as it is both not realistic and not desirable. The government then could take away incentives such as child support, thus implementing noncoercive policies rather than coercive policies.

Ethicist Stijn Bruers takes another approach in determining whether there is a problem of overpopulation and if measures should be taken to limit population numbers. In determining this, it is important to look at the total wellbeing of the people involved. This means that there only can be conceived of a problem of overpopulation in the Netherlands if additional number people would result in a negative wellbeing of the Dutch population. As long as additional people being born experience a positive wellbeing, there is no problem of overpopulation (Bruers, interview). According to the Luck Measurer (*Geluksmeter*) of the CBS, the average Dutch person has a score of 7,2 (CBS, 2020). This means that the average Dutch person experiences a positive wellbeing. Therefore, according to the total utilitarianism approach used by Bruers, which considers total wellbeing, there is no problem of overpopulation in the Netherlands.

As has been said before, Bruers also includes animals and their wellbeing in his thoughts on overpopulation. Therefore, to assess whether there is an overpopulation of animals, their wellbeing should be measured as well. The great majority of the animals on our planet are farm animals. To illustrate: the domesticated animals of the world weigh about 700 million tons, compared with fewer than 100 million tons for large wild animals (Harari, 2015).

These animals often live in horrific conditions in which they experience a lot of suffering and are being treated badly (Simmons, 2016). Next to this, the animal industry is an extremely unsustainable industry, because of its large amount of GHG-emissions and its contribution to biodiversity loss and water scarcity (Bellarby et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2017). Every year, around 80 billion animals are being killed for their meat and this number is expected to grow as consumption is expected to increase as the world is getting richer. Therefore, there is a case of overpopulation regarding farm animals. There are political parties that propose to limit the number of animals in factory farming, of which the Party for the Animals is the most ambitious as they want to get rid of the bio industry altogether.

Bruers gives another argument for his statement that human overpopulation is not such a serious problem. In talking about overpopulation as an issue, it is often being argued that more people will need more (finite) resources, with as a negative consequence the depletion of the Earth. While Bruers agrees that there are certain resources that are valuable and may become scarce as the world population grows, there is one resource that is far more valuable,

which is knowledge (Bruers, interview). First of all, Bruers says, knowledge is not a resource that can be depleted and secondly, it is a resource of which there will be more available, as more people will be born. With a larger population size, future developments will be more likely, such as the cure of now still incurable diseases, but it also increases efficient use of resources through more available knowledge. In this regard, large populations are not the problem, but the solution to sustainability issues. Bruers does not stand alone in this view on population size and knowledge. Supporters of 'ecomodernism', a relatively new philosophy in the sustainability debate, also think the solution to many environmental problems lies in improving and developing technologies and believe in the inventiveness of humans. They think that traditional environmental movement is too negative about the relationship between humans and nature (Visscher et al., 2017). The scientific community also pays increasing attention to the potential of the human resource base of societies and (Lutz, 2014).

Also, according to the SCP (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research) the Dutch population is becoming more highly educated (Maslowski, 2020). Following the perspective of Bruers and the ecomodernists, overpopulation is not a problem in general and certainly not in the Netherlands.

Table 4 contains an schematic overview of the experts' views on overpopulation and the different dimensions of overpopulation the experts focus on.

Expert	Jelle Reumer	Jan van Veeren	Ton van Rietbergen	Stijn Bruers
Function	Biologist (UU)	Secretary of the Dutch NGO 'The Ten Million Club'	Economic geographer (UU)	Environmental philosopher
Focuses mainly on which dimension of overpopulation	Ecological	Economical and environmental	Economical	Ethical
Acknowledges overpopulation as an issue	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thinks the Netherlands has an overpopulation issue	Yes	Yes	No	Depends, human: no animal: yes
Arguments	Cause of many ecological problems: GHG-emissions, biodiversity loss and habitat destruction	-Housing problem -We need to import goods to satisfy our needs and thus we are exceeding the carrying capacity of the Netherlands	Population growth can't be regulated (easily) and is already slowing down. More effective to focus on technology and price regulation	-Wellbeing as criteria: negative wellbeing in animal population, not in human population. -Knowledge is most valuable resource and increases with population growth
Role for government to limit overpopulation	-Take away child promoting incentives -Invest in development aid	Address immigration in all its forms	-	Invest in development aid.

Table 4: Overview of experts and their views on overpopulation

5. Discussion

While some attention is being paid to the issue of overpopulation by the Dutch political parties, adjustments have to be made regarding the way overpopulation is looked at and the proposed solutions, because both the definition of overpopulation and the measures proposed by the parties are lacking in scope. The text analysis of the manifestos shows that overpopulation is being discussed by the parties in two ways. First, it is often presented as a given fact, an "act of God" (Reumer, interview) and rather the consequences of overpopulation than overpopulation itself are the domain of policy proposals, such as upscaling agriculture or investing in green technologies. Second, when overpopulation is being addressed as a problem, it is being presented as an immigration problem. In the latter case, the focus is more on cultural and social issues than on the ecological implications (Van Veeren, interview).

Despite the many mentions that overpopulation would be a controversial and rarely mentioned issue, this doesn't follow from the analysis of the election results, as most parties acknowledge a growing population, both on a national level and a global level and they understand that this comes with certain problems. However, there are hardly any proposed measures in the manifestos that aim to limit this overpopulation, except for immigration regulations. Therefore, overpopulation as an issue is not so much a controversial topic, but rather the solutions to deal with it. Among the interviewed experts and in the scientific literature, there is agreement on the fact that overpopulation has negative impacts on the environment and leads to biodiversity loss. However, some argue that this calls for measures to limit overpopulation and others perceive overpopulation as a given and state that it is more effective to invest in measures that deal with the consequences of overpopulation or the other two factors in the IPAT-equation, affluence and technological inefficiency. Despite these disagreements, the experts all think that there are measures the government can or should take to deal with overpopulation or its consequences. Because having children is so closely related to human nature and freedom, democratic governments don't want to burn their hands in restricting this freedom (Van Veeren, interview). Such extreme and direct measures as the Chinese one-child policy would be unimaginable in the Netherlands. However, the government can implement more indirect measures, such as limiting child support to the firstborn child, as suggested by Reumer.

The focus on immigration is partly justified. On the one hand, the growth of the Dutch population is only explained by immigration, so it makes sense to aim policy at immigration

in order to reduce the pressure on the carrying capacity of the Netherlands as a country (Van Veenen, interview; Reumer, interview). On the other hand, immigration is a zero-sum game, people entering a country do leave another country. Therefore, on a global scale, immigration doesn't matter that much with regard to overpopulation. Simply closing the borders of the Netherlands for immigrants is not the best issue. A very effective way to deal with overpopulation is to invest in development aid to developing countries in the form of welfare programs, family planning, education of women and child control (Bongaarts & Sinding, 2011; Bruers, interview). These measures do include a variety of co-benefits as well, such as gender equity, child health economic development, environmental protection and avoidance of conflicts (O'Sullivan, 2017). Moreover, these kind of measures do not only limit overpopulation in those countries, but also in the Netherlands and the Western countries in general, because through the increased welfare in the developing countries, less people will immigrate (Reumer, interview). However, there are limitations to this, because the support of local governments is needed to implement such programs. In religious countries for example, there is often resistance to birth control (Van Veeren, interview). More general, the relation between immigration and overpopulation needs to be addressed more clearly, as this is done mostly by nationalist right-wing parties. Only, their proposed solutions are not the most effective or desirable. Also, immigration has some benefits for the Netherlands as a receiving country, because taking up immigrants can improve human capital development (Lutz, 2014). For the immigrants, this can happen through receiving education in the Netherlands and contributing to the Dutch economy, which is especially beneficial as the Dutch population is aging and demands a larger working class. Parties that are against immigration see it as a threat for the Netherlands and the Dutch culture that the Dutch population is declining while the number of immigrants is increasing. These two arguments, pro-immigration and anti-immigration, dominate the political debate on immigration, while the ecological aspect is rarely mentioned.

According to the theory of green liberalism, non-human animals should be included in the moral circle of concern (Van den Berg, 2012). Overpopulation then is definitely an issue regarding farm animals (Bruers, interview; Reumer, interview). The negative impacts of the animal agriculture are not less grave than those of human overpopulation and they even amplify each other. The negative wellbeing of animals in factory farming as opposed to the positive wellbeing of the average Dutch citizen adds to the gravity of the issue of animal overpopulation (Bruers, interview). In order to limit the ecological impacts of the animal agriculture, the number of livestock has to decrease and in order to limit animal suffering,

factory farming should cease to exist in its entirety. This dimension of overpopulation is very poorly addressed by the political parties in general.

Due to limited time, only four relevant experts have been interviewed. While their expertise and field of work all yielded relevant insights that added to the research, more and different experts could have been interviewed such as a demographer, who could have added more on the developments of the Dutch population or a political expert, who could have contributed more on the question how policies and election manifestos are drawn up and what kind of limitations and opportunities there are in this process.

There are also limitations in using election manifestos as units of analysis for policy on overpopulation, because election manifestos are not existing policy but rather proposed or desired policy. It is not yet clear in what way and how much of these proposed policies will find its way in legislation. Also, in some cases, the analysed election manifestos were draft manifestos, which means that there can be some differences between the draft and the final version. However, these manifestos do provide a reliable overview of the approaches towards overpopulation adopted by the different parties and therefore also of the Dutch citizens. Future research can determine if and how much measures to deal with overpopulation are really being taken up in the legislation of the next cabinet.

While the recommendations made here, are based on Dutch demographics and aimed mainly at Dutch politics, they can be interpreted as a more broad population policy rationale. After all, some of the recommendations are applicable to those countries that experience demographic developments similar to the Netherlands. Also, some of the recommended measures have an international scope and thus surpass the more national perspective that has been taken in this research. Mainly the relationship between immigration and overpopulation is one that could be investigated to a deeper extent in future research, in which an international perspective on policy making could be taken.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to analyse in what way the issue of overpopulation is being addressed by the different Dutch political parties, which formed the descriptive part of the research. Subsequently, for the normative part, the key question was whether the Dutch parties should propose to adopt more strict population policies and in what way. This research has also shed light on the philosophical and more specifically the ethical considerations in

discussing the issue of overpopulation and the ways political parties, but also individuals aim to address and deal with overpopulation.

The reason for conducting this research was the presupposed controversy surrounding the issue of overpopulation. After analysing the election manifestos and after having spoken with the experts, it became clear that the controversy did not so much lie with the issue itself but rather with the measures to limit overpopulation. This controversy is partly justified and understandable as measures that aim to limit reproduction are experienced as a violation of freedom and indisputable human rights. In the end, family planning is an individual decision in which the government can only exert a limited influence. On the other hand, the link between immigration and overpopulation is still controversial which impedes effective and humane measures to deal with this aspect of overpopulation. At the moment, the link between immigration and overpopulation is only mentioned by the far-right parties who put the focus on cultural and social issues. Therefore, the other parties are hesitant to make the connection between immigration and overpopulation, which makes this a rarely discussed topic in politics, while there are possible effective and ethical measures that address this connection, other than closing the borders, as suggested by the far-right parties. Measures in the form of development aid can help to address the immigration aspect of overpopulation, that have a positive effect on both the developing countries and the developed countries to which people emigrate.

For the ethical part of the research, the expanding moral circle was introduced, in which animals and future generations are added to the entities that deserve moral consideration. This means that in the debate on overpopulation, non-human overpopulation should be assessed as well and be dealt with accordingly. Both from an ethical and an ecological point of view, factory farming is responsible for an overpopulation issue of farm animals. The political parties acknowledge to some extent this form of overpopulation, be it mostly from the ecological viewpoint. Because of this, the proposed policies to deal with this problem are not very ambitious.

The results from this research and the proposed measures can also contribute to the SDG's that were mentioned earlier. Dealing with overpopulation can greatly contribute to reducing poverty and hunger (SDG 1 and SDG 2), especially in developing regions. By improving these SDG's for developing regions, inequalities will also be reduced (SDG 10), as the inequalities between developed and developing regions will become smaller. Putting limits on animal overpopulation also contributes to reducing inequalities between humans and non-human animals. Putting limits on overpopulation in general will improve the capacity of

future generations to meet their own needs and thus it will contribute to reducing inequalities between present and future generations as well.

7. Acknowledgements

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https://www.ioresearch.nl/actueel/io-zetelpeiling-vvd-groeit-door-pvv-vergroot-voorsprong-op-achtervolgers/

Election manifestos

VVD: https://www.vvd.nl/content/uploads/2020/11/Verkiezingsprogramma-concept-VVD-2021-2025.pdf

PVV:
https://www.pvv.nl/images/09012020/verkiezingen2020/0acxyuew34z/VerkiezingsProgramma2021-Final.pdf

CDA:
https://d14uo0i7wmc99w.cloudfront.net/user_upload/CDAverkiezingsprogramma2021.pdf

D66: https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/d66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-2025-een-nieuw-begin2.pdf

GroenLinks: https://groenlinks.nl/sites/groenlinks/files/2020-10/Concept%20Verkiezingsprogramma%20GroenLinks.pdf

SP: https://www.sp.nl/sites/default/files/1e_conceptverkprogr_2020.pdf

PvdA: https://www.pvda.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/PvdA-2021-2025-Ons-plan-voor-een-eerlijker-en-fatsoenlijker-Nederland-Printversie.pdf

CU: https://insite.christenunie.nl/l/library/download/urn:uuid:284b3663-4f84-452b-8cf6-bb5c8fd53c92/concept-+verkiezingsprogramma+2021-2025.pdf

PvdD: https://www.partijvoordedieren.nl/uploads/algemeen/Verkiezingsprogramma-Partij-voor-de-Dieren-Tweede-Kamerverkiezingen-2021.pdf

50PLUS:
https://50pluspartij.nl/images/PDFs/Verkiezingen_2021/VKP/50PLUS_Verkiezingsprogramma_2021_2025.pdf

SGP: https://sgp.nl/actueel/publicaties/verkiezingsprogramma-2021-2025

DENK: https://www.bewegingdenk.nl/denkanders/

FvD:
https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/themes/5f046e874445ea153fad59b0/attachments/original/1610052730/Concept_Verkiezingsprogramma_FVD_2020.pdf?1610052730

9. Appendix

Appendix A - Information letter:

INFORMATIEBLAD VOOR ONDERZOEKSDEELNEMERS

Views on overpopulation in the Netherlands

An ethical analysis of policy proposals on population control by Dutch political parties, with regard to the ecological crisis

Maxim Landweer
Universiteit Utrecht

December 2020

Wat is het doel van deze studie?

Inzicht krijgen in de mate waarin en de manier waarop overbevolking in Nederland geadresseerd wordt door de verschillende Nederlandse politieke partijen in aanloop naar de Tweede Kamerverkiezingen van 17 maart 2021.

Wat moet ik doen als ik aan het onderzoek deelneem?

De onderzoeker een beter begrip helpen te krijgen van 'overbevolking' en meer specifiek de vraag helpen beantwoorden of en hoe er strengere maatregelen getroffen moeten worden om overbevolking tegen te gaan in Nederland.

Hoe lang ben ik met het onderzoek bezig?

45 tot 60 minuten in de vorm van een interview

Wat zijn de mogelijke risico's of ongemakken?

Geen, tenzij er bezwaar is tegen het vermelden van naam, titel en/of instelling van de geïnterviewde in het onderzoek.

Zijn er mogelijke voordelen?

Nee

Zullen mijn persoonsgegevens en de informatie over mijn deelname vertrouwelijk behandeld worden?

Uw antwoorden zullen strikt vertrouwelijk behandeld worden en de digitale gegevens zullen in beveiligde computerbestanden opgeslagen worden die alleen voor de onderzoekers toegankelijk zijn. Geen enkele publicatie over dit onderzoek zal uw naam of enige andere informatie bevatten die naar uw persoon zou kunnen leiden.

Wat zijn mijn rechten als ik aan het onderzoek deelneem?

Uw deelname aan het onderzoek is geheel vrijwillig. U zult geen vergoeding ontvangen voor uw deelname. U kunt uw deelname weigeren, of, als u besluit mee te doen, uw deelname op ieder moment stoppen, zonder dat u daarvan nadelige gevolgen ondervindt.

Met wie kan ik contact opnemen als ik vragen over het onderzoek heb?

Als u vragen, commentaar of bedenkingen heeft betreffende dit onderzoeksproject, dan kunt u contact opnemen met de onderzoekers. Neemt u dan contact op met Maxim Landweer of Floris van den Berg (begeleider)

Indien u vragen heeft over uw rechten als deelnemer aan het onderzoek of als u bedenkingen heeft over de wijze waarop de deelnemers aan het onderzoek worden behandeld, neemt u dan telefonisch contact op met +31654768347, of schrijft u naar: m.p.a.landweer@students.uu.nl

Appendix B - Informed consent forms (signed)

Dr. Jan van Veeren:

Consent form

Views on overpopulation in the Netherlands

An ethical analysis of policy proposals on population control by Dutch political parties, with regard to the ecological crisis

Ik heb de informatie voor de deelnemer gelezen. Ik kon aanvullende vragen stellen. Mijn vragen zijn genoeg beantwoord. Ik had genoeg tijd om te beslissen of ik meedoe.

Ik weet dat meedoen helemaal vrijwillig is. Ik ben me ervan bewust dat ik op ieder moment kan beslissen om toch niet mee te doen. Daarvoor hoef ik geen reden te geven.
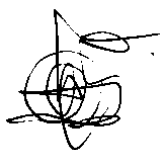
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Ik geef toestemming om mijn gegevens te gebruiken, voor de doelen die in de informatie(brief) staan. Mocht er aanleiding zijn om de gegevens te gebruiken voor een ander onderzoeksdoel dan zal opnieuw toestemming aan mij worden gevraagd.

Ik geef toestemming om gegevens nog 10 jaar na afloop van dit onderzoek te bewaren voor nadere analyse in het kader van dit onderzoek.

Naam deelnemer: Jan van Weeren

Handtekening: Datum : 15 / 12 / 2020

Ik verklaar hierbij dat ik deze deelnemer voldoende heb geïnformeerd over het genoemde onderzoek.

Als er tijdens het onderzoek informatie bekend wordt die de toestemming van de deelnemer zou kunnen beïnvloeden, dan breng ik hem/haar daarvan tijdig op de hoogte op een wijze waardoor ik er zeker van ben dat de informatie de deelnemer bereikt heeft.

Naam onderzoeker (of diens vertegenwoordiger):

Handtekening: Datum: 15 / 12 / 2020

Dr. Stijn Bruers:

Consent form

Views on overpopulation in the Netherlands

An ethical analysis of policy proposals on population control by Dutch political parties, with
regard to the ecological crisis

Ik heb de informatie voor de deelnemer gelezen. Ik kon aanvullende vragen stellen. Mijn
vragen zijn genoeg beantwoord. Ik had genoeg tijd om te beslissen of ik meedoe.

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Naam deelnemer: Stijn Bruers

Handtekening: Datum : 15/12/2020

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Naam onderzoeker (of diens vertegenwoordiger):
Handtekening: Datum: 15 / 12 / 2020

Prof. Dr. Jelle Reumer:

Consent form

Views on overpopulation in the Netherlands

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Naam deelnemer: *Jelle Reumer*
Handtekening: Datum: 08/01/2021

Ik verklaar hierbij dat ik deze deelnemer voldoende heb geïnformeerd over het genoemde onderzoek.

Als er tijdens het onderzoek informatie bekend wordt die de toestemming van de deelnemer zou kunnen beïnvloeden, dan breng ik hem/haar daarvan tijdig op de hoogte op een wijze waardoor ik er zeker van ben dat de informatie de deelnemer bereikt heeft.

Naam onderzoeker (of diens vertegenwoordiger):
Handtekening: Datum: 08/01/2021

I

Dr. Ton van Rietbergen:

Consent form

Views on overpopulation in the Netherlands

An ethical analysis of policy proposals on population control by Dutch political parties, with regard to the ecological crisis

Ik heb de informatie voor de deelnemer gelezen. Ik kon aanvullende vragen stellen. Mijn vragen zijn genoeg beantwoord. Ik had genoeg tijd om te beslissen of ik meedoe.

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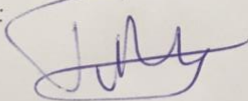
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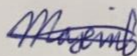Naam deelnemer: Ton van Rietbergen
Handtekening: Datum: 19/12/2020

Ik verklaar hierbij dat ik deze deelnemer voldoende heb geïnformeerd over het genoemde onderzoek.

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Naam onderzoeker (of diens vertegenwoordiger):
Handtekening: Datum: 19/12/2020