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Population research, its relevance and topicality

Bulletin of Geography. Socio-Economic Series nr 9, 59-62

2008

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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POPULATION RESEARCH, ITS RELEVANCE AND TOPICALITY

ABSTRACT: The first part of the paper divides the field of population research into several categories that the author uses in the further discussion. In addition to identifying problems and processes occurring within the distinguished categories, and to assessing the status of demographic situation, population research should take into account practical forecasting. The other part of the paper presents a topical and most needed programme of research applicable to population geography.

KEY WORDS: population geography, population forecast, programme of population research.

A very broad range of subjects within population research can be quite consistently divided into categories corresponding to researchers' interests, but also meeting expectations of the recipients. In my opinion, the categories are as follows: I) the number of population: its status and growth; II) the distribution of population in geographical space; III) demographic and social structures; IV) a natural development of population; V) migration of population; VI) demographic syntheses and forecasts (monographic perspectives on regions and countries). Each of the categories should contain studies exploring theories of development or at least their regularities, the typology of demographic processes, the regionalization of individual phenomena, proposals of new research methods and techniques, and reach synthetic attempts at demographic regionalization.

I think, the significance of population research (the proposal to call it geodemographic was not accepted by a broader scientific community) has three aspects, the first of which is cognition of truth and expansion of knowledge about

the reality around us. This aspect benefits from research studying problems and processes identified in all the aforementioned categories. The research should enable a thorough understanding of the various time and space dimensions of reality and should contribute to the development of a given discipline and to the tertiary education process.

The second aspect involves research into the present-day status of demographic situation. This research can be important for actions undertaken by the national administration and local self-governing administration, and for the formulation of demands towards the current national and local policies. Inventory and documentative work within demogeographic research has its practical side too, which is frequently used by the planning institutions, even though geographers play only a supporting role here, as suppliers of useful evidence, who are excluded from the shaping of planning concepts. Following selection and processing at various levels of cognition, outcomes of this type of research should become part of school textbooks and of broadly understood activities aimed at popularizing knowledge.

The content of research into population geography described in such a way fully corresponds to an idea based on the triad: problem, process, and place, which was promoted by Professor Maria Kielczewska-Zaleska. In my opinion, however, this standpoint cannot be satisfactory for the community of geographers any longer, and, hence, a fourth aspect is required. In order to increase the relevance and usefulness of our population research, we should transform the triad into a four Ps approach: problem, process, place, and, prognosis. As a consequence, a population research programme should give room for forecasting, thus enabling us to contribute to the development of planning projects and to the formulation of local and regional programmes addressing socio-economic issues. Sound forecasts can provide a valuable starting point for conceiving various scenarios of socio-economic development, including warning forecasts.

It seems that research into Poland's population potential in the near future and over the next decades is urgently needed today. The research should especially focus on labour force in the country and in regions that are particularly exposed to temporary, i.e. economic, emigration, but also to a long-term emigration that develops into a permanent emigration.

Investigations exploring depopulation processes in certain areas, and, in broader territorial terms, changes in the extent of the known world become topical. Redistribution of population within the limits of individual regions and countries, and especially in regions with metropolitan cities, comes to be a particularly important social question. Urban population can be viewed as another research subject, especially in relation to inhabitants living in special parts of towns where the population number shows temporary rises. The same applies to resorts of

clearly seasonal character, as well as towns with well-developed commercial and scientific functions (with specialised secondary and tertiary schools), where seasonal or periodic inflows of population affect the development of various services, cause travelling problems, and shape both the living conditions of the permanent inhabitants and the town image, giving it positive as well as negative features (higher levels of aggression, growing crime rates, etc.).

Investigations into population gender and age structures also become more and more relevant, especially these focused on the falling numbers of children and youth, which will strongly affect the network of primary schools and the condition of small rural settlements. The analyses of life expectancy and population ageing become most needed, and regarding the group of advanced-age population investigations into population health status that influences economic activity and labour force, fuelling also the need to develop various healthcare and welfare services.

Researchers should pay attention to changes in the structure of education, considering the surging number of students of private schools especially, which are already located even in the medium-sized towns, and mushrooming branches and consultation points established by the state universities. Another type of research that we need today should analyse changes in the occupational structure of population induced by the diversification of functions.

The growing pressure of migration from non-European countries should boost the interest in the national, ethnic, and cultural makeup of immigrants, and their preferred destinations, as well as in the adaptation or assimilation processes with the Polish nation.

As for the natural development of population, researchers need to focus on changing age at marriage (marriages at older age or following completion of tertiary education may have fewer children), stability of marriages, and widowhood being an inevitable consequence of extending life expectancy that increasingly favours women, but also on mixed marriages with foreigners. Regarding births, factors such as fertility rate, numbers, and order of births in relation to a family's economic status should be investigated. It is worthwhile to extend analyses of mortality processes to account for excessive mortality in certain age groups against growing numbers of deaths caused by diseases of civilisation and cancer induced by the conditions of the geographical and socio-economic environments.

Mass foreign trips, especially to the EU member states, present a key phenomenon of multi-faceted and far-reaching consequences. Examination of the scale of this migration and of its multiple demographic factors (changes affecting the gender and age structure of population, occupational structure, and impacts on natural increase), social factors (separation of family members, deferred

marriages), and economic factors should become an urgent and important goal of geographic research. Commuting to work continues to be a topical area for researchers; among other things, it helps identify the distance where influence of the workplace can be still visible, and the functional impact of urban areas.

Regarding synthetic studies, new monographic approaches to regions, especially to problematic regions, and countries are needed. Development trends along with the present state and development prospects of individual countries or geographical regions should constitute a basis for comparative research and for finding parallels to the situation in our country.

In my opinion, the above list of research goals is not complete, but it hopefully presents the most important of them that mainly respond to domestic needs. The list is not intended as a suggestion that we should limit ourselves to. Many research topics should be given a broader regional scope so that we could assess Poland's situation better and attempt the development of demographic forecasts for the country, while watching the global tendencies.

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