

To: EAPS Committee for the EAPS Award for Population Studies

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From: Joop de Beer, Tommy Bengtsson, Graziella Caselli, Andreas Edel, Albert

Esteve, Jane Falkingham, Jutta Gampe, Janina Jozwiak, Nico Keilman, Heiner Maier, Mikko

Myrskylä, James Raymer, Philip Rees, Sergei Scherbov, Tomas Sobotka, Laurent Toulemon, Helga de Valk, James Vaupel, Leo van Wissen, Guillaume Wunsch, Zeng Yi

We nominate Frans Willekens for the EAPS Award for Population Studies based on his lifetime achievements in research and in strengthening Demography in Europe. He is an inquisitive, open, supportive, creatively pragmatic, unassuming, problem-solving, productive and immensely hospitable scholar, teacher and research administrator.

Frans has made seminal research contributions to multistate modeling including multiregional demography: he has pioneered mathematical models, methods of parameter estimation from incomplete or defective data, and strategies for forecasting. Much of current modelling of migration is rooted in his research—and he is continuing to make advances by developing agent-based models at an Independent Research Group he currently heads at the Max Planck Institute in Rostock. The monograph by Willekens and Rogers on Spatial Population Analysis (1978) explained the basic methods and provided transparent software: this monograph has informed all subsequent work up through the latest Wittgenstein projections. Related research includes his articles on “Multistate demography” (2003) and “Biographic forecasting: Bridging the micro-macro gap in population forecasting” (2005). Frans emphasizes the life-course perspective for understanding demographic behavior, e.g., in “The life course: models and analysis” (1999). He stresses the importance of the use of appropriate statistical techniques for estimating rates from empirical data, most recently in “Chronological objects in demographic research” (2013). From 1978 on Frans has shared software with others to facilitate the use of models: a package called Biograph (2011) can be used to estimate transition rates and life-course indicators. Frans has strived to promote interdisciplinary research between demography and other disciplines, especially health sciences. Given his dedication to teaching, Frans’ research is being passed on to younger demographers in Europe and beyond. He has fostered international collaboration, notably with China, India, Pakistan and very recently North Korea.

Frans became Professor in demography at the University of Groningen in 1989. He founded the University’s Population Research Centre (PRC), where theoretical and methodological research are combined with applied research. PRC attracts many international students and has proven to be very fertile soil for PhDs. Frans supervised or co-supervised 38 PhD students (some while he was Director of NIDI), many of whom have now become leading international demographers in their own right. Frans also helped to found the Post-Doctoral Program in Demography and he started a master’s program in Population Studies based on the framework of lives in context and the life course. This framework served as the core of a new research focus at NIDI, which Frans directed from August 2003 through February 2011. Under Frans’ inspired academic leadership the Institute flourished. Combining scientific excellence with social relevance and impact was key to Frans’ contribution to NIDI—and to demography in general.

In 2003 EAPS established a Committee on Education with Frans Willekens as Chair. This Committee, under Frans’ leadership, organized the European Doctoral School of Demography (EDSD) and established the program’s curriculum. As Chair of the EDSD Scientific Board he has presided over a total of 16 EDSD Board meetings held around Europe. In substantial part because of Frans’ dedication to doctoral education in demography, the EDSD today receives support from 11 universities (Groningen, Lund, Rome, Rostock, Tallinn, Warsaw School of Economics, London School of Economics, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Université catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, University of Southampton, University of Southern Denmark) and 5 research institutions (CED, INED, MPIDR, NIDI, VID).

Frans chaired (no one is a better chair of meetings) the Constituting Meeting of “Population Europe: The European Population Partnership” at NIDI on June 15-16, 2009. Under his leadership, more than 20 European universities and institutions agreed to a memorandum of agreement. This has been the governing document of a highly successful initiative that has since grown to 38 partners and collaborating institutions and that is playing a major role in disseminating demographic information in Europe. Willekens, Caselli and Vaupel form the Board of Trustees, the top decision-making body of Population Europe.

In sum, Frans has made path-breaking contributions to demographic modeling, estimation and forecasting. Furthermore, he has greatly strengthened the discipline of Demography in Europe through his dedicated work at Groningen, NIDI and now as Independent Research Group Leader and Chief Research Coordinator of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research as well as through his founding leadership of the European Doctoral School of Demography and of Population Europe, two of the most important initiatives to advance population research, teaching and outreach in Europe. He merits the EAPS Award for Population Studies.