

Demographic challenges in the EU (I)

Strategies for a new society

1 February 2020



Even though demography and population trends are largely predictable, unlike most of the changes experimented by societies, and different initiatives have been taken in the European Union, it seems obvious that this issue has not been addressed proportionally as to what its importance and evidence imply.

The European Union has seen its population grow substantially — by around a quarter in the five and a half decades since 1960 — to the current level of over 500 million people. However, this population is now growing slowly and is even expected to decline in the longer term. At just 6.9 % today, the EU represents an ever-shrinking proportion of the world population; this proportion is projected to fall further, to a mere 4.1 % by the end of this century.

All European regions are affected by demographic impacts such as the ageing of the population driven by longer life-spans and low levels of fertility, yet some — especially remote, rural and/or border — experience these impacts much more strongly than others.

As part of another on-going trend, people — particularly younger and economically productive people of a child-bearing age — have been moving to the cities, towns or suburbs in ever growing numbers. This trend has had a twofold impact on the regions that have been losing their young people: a popu-

“I want you to lead the Commission’s work on ensuring that Europe understands and responds to one of its deepest lying challenges: demographic change. This affects every part of our society: from the economy to healthcare, from migration to the environment. It also shapes our politics, society and culture, and has an impact on our place in the world.”
[1]

As representatives of many thousands of families in most European Union Member States, the International Federation for Family Development considers the present demographic challenges as a vital issue for Europe’s future.
[2]

Ignacio Socias, Contribution of IFFD to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee entitled ‘Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities’ (Brussels, 14th January 2020).

lation decline and a change in the make-up of the remaining population (faster ageing). Recent migration trends have also improved the demographic dynamics of certain European regions. However, migration on its own will not be enough to reverse the trends of population decline. [3]

Therefore, the response to demographic change should be broad, coordinated and integrated, as this is a cross-cutting issue. The European Parliament, in its resolution of 9 September 2015 on the Report on the implementation, results and overall assessment of the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, called on the Commission “to adopt an EU Strategy on Demographic Change to coordinate EU action in various areas in order to ensure synergies and maximise their positive impact on Europe’s citizens, economy and job creation, as well as protect the human rights of older persons in all EU policies”. [4]

A new society

We are living new times. As the president of the European Commission puts it in the Mission letter already mentioned, “changes in climate, digital technologies and geopolitics are already having a profound effect on the lives of Europeans. We are witnessing major shifts all the way from global power structures to local politics.

While these transformations may be different in nature, we must show the same ambition and determination in our response. What we do now will determine what kind of world our children live in and will define Europe’s place in the world.” [5] Reliable data and state-of-the-art analysis are key prerequisites for evidence-based policymaking. There is a need for more capability for comprehensive demographic analysis (by age, education and labour-force status) of likely future population trends in and around Europe.

We need to deepen in the new definition on how to know better what is the reality we are living in — without losing touch with it — and to make governance effective, as the way rules, norms and actions are structured, sustained, regulated and held accountable. Experts have already shown that we need a sharing, sustainable and connected society

- Sharing: A sharing society makes citizens able to interact, based on the share of information and a co-construction process. This new form of governance is needed to test and implement genuine ways of citizen participation, including the voice of the most deprived. The co-construction will make it possible to establish new methods to meet urban challenges, thanks to a cross-sectoral partnership: public and private, citizens and associations working together to set up collaborative, open-ended strategies to find innovative and non-discriminating responses for the urban future

- Sustainable: A sustainable society should implement the energy transition while building smart networks and systems; develop the territory without weakening the environment; make mobility accessible to all and eco-friendly; recycle and consume more responsibly and be every day more resilient.

- Connected: A connected society creates digital opportunities for everyone and make sure they have access to them; fights against the digital divide; develops a digital media infrastructure; designs and offers new services of general interest; and makes data and information accessible to all.

Strategy

The main goal of the strategy should be to bring all policies — cohesion, innovation, transport, health, society and employment, ITC, rural development, emigration, etc. — more into tune with this issue.

It should have a firm basis in human rights, involve cost-analysis and projections at national, regional and local level, and prioritise the creation of life sustaining and creating opportunities to help to attract and retain young people in all regions and to foster balanced growth between densely populated areas, areas experiencing population loss and thinly populated areas, focusing on the provision of high-quality public services for all citizens.

It should also promote family-friendly policies, in particular measures to remove barriers that discourage parenthood; increase the birth rate; incorporate a gender-related perspective; encourage independent living for older people; increase healthy life expectancy and reduce dependency; combat the social exclusion faced by some of the population and promote renewed efforts to support the recognition of unpaid domestic work and the implementation of policies to balance work and family life. [6]

We mention below some of our inputs for what we consider the three main axes of this strategy: focus on families, be inclusive and incorporate the UN 2030 Agenda.

Focus on families

In our research project with UNICEF and UN DESA on SDGs & Families, findings show that the many advantages of well-designed family-focused policy include: reductions in poverty; improvements in employment; gender equality; health and education outcomes. Family policies are a mainstay of national public policies, and the most meaningful vehicle for governments to influence the living standards of upcoming generations. [7]

Helping families is also a way to compensate the social effects of their efforts, especially including decisions on investments in health, housing and education. Too often, the time, effort and money families

spend in their children finds no social or economic incentive by the society benefitting from them.

The last Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on family issues, encourages all Member States to “invest in a variety of inclusive, family-oriented policies and programmes, which take into account the different needs and expectations of families, as important tools for, inter alia, fighting poverty, social exclusion and inequality, promoting work-family balance and gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity, to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. [8]

Be inclusive

The goal should be to leave no one behind, to get on board as many stakeholders as possible. For this purpose, it is essential to adapt to diversity of situations, considering it as a major value of our present societies. Maybe in the past, choices were more difficult in finding the own way of life and place in society, but today we can choose more, and more freedom is always a step forward in human values and empowerment. Because of that, the combination between leaving no one behind and redistributing with fairness the goods and services to meet human needs implies recognizing that private decisions often have public consequences, and they are not always the same.

Social policies should take into account the social relevance of choices, so that the public provisions of goods and services is proportional to the results of those choices. Leaving no one behind also means the answer to these questions: [9]

- Discrimination: What biases, exclusion or mistreatment do people face based on one or more aspect of their identity (ascribed or assumed), including prominently gender as well as ethnicity, age, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, indigenous, migratory status etc.?
- Geography: Who endures isolation, vulnerability, missing or inferior public services, transportation, internet or other infrastructure gaps due to their place of residence?
- Governance: Where do people face disadvantage due to ineffective, unjust, unaccountable or unresponsive global, national and/or sub-national institutions? Who is affected by inequitable, inadequate or unjust laws, policies, processes or budgets? Who is less or unable to gain influence or participate meaningfully in the decisions that impact them?
- Socio-economic status: Who faces deprivation or disadvantages in terms of income, life expectancy and educational attainment? Who has less chances to stay healthy, be nourished and educated? Compete in the labour market? Acquire wealth and/or benefit from quality health care, clean water,

sanitation, energy, social protection and financial services?

- Shocks and fragility: Who is more exposed and/or vulnerable to setbacks due to the impacts of climate change, natural hazards, violence, conflict, displacement, health emergencies, economic downturns, price or other shocks?

Incorporate the UN 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including its 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, was adopted on 25 September 2015 by Heads of State and Government at a special UN summit. Its adoption was a landmark achievement, providing for a shared global vision towards sustainable development for all.

The EU played an important role in shaping the 2030 Agenda, through public consultations, dialogue with our partners and in-depth research. Once it was approved, the EU has continued to play a leading role as we move into the implementation of this ambitious, transformative and universal Agenda that delivers poverty eradication and sustainable development for all.

Environments

Other factors that should be taken into account have to do with three aspects that shape the demographic challenges: the so-called ‘fertility gap’, the differences between rural and urban areas and the persistence of ‘brain drain’ in many countries, especially in their influence on the youth transitions.

Desired and actual fertility

Lower fertility rates that have spread in European countries can reflect changes in both individuals’ lifestyle preferences and the constraints that they face in everyday life. These constraints may reflect the emergence of new risk factors and the failure of policies to provide adequate support. Evidence about the potential role of these constraints on women’s childbearing decisions can be derived from answers to questions about the ‘desired’ or ‘ideal’ number of children derived from opinion surveys. While interpreting survey data about these questions is not without problems, evidence suggests that: [10]

- Women generally have fewer children than they actually want.
- The gap between desired and observed fertility rates is higher in OECD countries where fertility rates are lower.
- The gap between desired and observed fertility rates has increased over the past twenty years, both on average and in most OECD countries. This partly reflects the effect of postponement of

childbearing on the total fertility rate, but it affects both younger and older women.

Rural and urban areas

Demographic developments have various implications for European regions. Some of them, especially rural and remote ones, are experiencing a considerable decline in population numbers. This situation may further exacerbate the economic decline regions are already facing, and thereby widen the gap between wealthy and poor ones.

Cities and urban areas are often seen as centres of economic growth, providing opportunities for study, innovation and employment. European urban areas are often characterised by high concentrations of economic activity, employment and wealth, with the daily flow of commuters into many of Europe's largest cities suggesting that opportunities abound in these hubs of innovation, distribution and consumption. The good and dense transport system they offer encourages mobility and all forms of transactions.

Cities are indeed attracting people, but because of the high costs of urban living, people may settle in nearby towns, suburbs or small urban/rural areas.

In addition, urban areas face a range of complex social challenges: exclusion of less well-off people and families from the city centres and expensive suburbs, issues relating to social cohesion, supply of affordable housing or the provision of efficient and affordable transport services. [11]

Migration and brain drain

The movement of skilled workers internationally represents brain gain for the countries that reap their skills and experience and brain drain for their countries of origin. On the brain gain side of the divide, countries increasingly are looking to position their immigration policies to attract the types of international workers and students whose skills they desire.

Scientists who have emigrated for several reasons are recoverable assets who can play a part in developing opportunities at home. However, recovery requires the opening of diverse and creative conduits. The health services in the developing world must be supported to maintain their skilled personnel. Only when healthy staff, whatever their cadre, have the tools they require to do their job, training opportunities, a network of supportive colleagues, and recognition for the difficult job they do, are they likely to feel motivated to stay put when opportunity beckons from elsewhere.

Consequences for legislation and social policies planning should consider the following: [12]

- It is fundamental for local and regional authorities to become aware of the brain drain problem and identify the talent they want to retain, attract or regain.
- There needs to be a coordination of players and the synergy of resources to focus on talent-based growth strategies.
- The opportunity to identify key driving sectors for retaining/attracting talent should be taken into account.
- They should stimulate the absorption of talent from outside, by attracting international talent or regaining such talent that had previously moved away through the setting-up of specific projects or medium-term strategies as well as branding initiatives or initiatives aimed at rewarding talent.
- Structural impediments or barriers should be removed, whether they are related to infrastructure, services and facilities or the reputation of the locality/region and culture.
- Public authorities facing the same challenges should seek cooperative and/or shared solutions.

[1] Ursula von der Leyen, *Mission letter to Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President-designate for Democracy and Demography* (2019).

[2] More information available at www.iffd.org and www.familyperspective.org.

[3] Cf. Vasilis Margaras, 'Demographic trends in EU regions', *European Parliamentary Research Service* (2019).

[4] *European Parliament, resolution of 9 September 2015 on the Report on the implementation, results and overall assessment of the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2014/2255(INI))*.

[5] Ursula von der Leyen, *Mission letter ...*

[6] *European Committee of the Regions, 'EU response to the demographic challenge'* (2016).

[7] UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, 'Key Findings on Families, Family Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis Report' (2018).

[8] A/C.3/74/L.13/Rev.1.

[9] *United Nations Development Program, 'What Does It Mean to Leave No One Behind?'* (2018).

[10] Anna Cristina D'Addio and Marco Mira d'Ercole, 'Policies, Institutions and Fertility Rates: A Panel Data Analysis for OECD Countries', *OECD Economic Studies No. 41* (2006).

[11] Cf. Vasilis Margaras, 'Demographic trends ...'

[12] *European Committee of the Regions, 'Addressing brain drain: the local and regional dimension'* (2018).