

Demographic developments in the EU

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You are all well aware of the facts and of demographic developments in the EU. According to information provided by the Commission, the number of persons age 60 and over will increase 50% in the coming years, while the number of young people (to age 19) will decline 1% and the number of adults (20 to 59) will slip 6%. The consequences of this increasingly pronounced swing towards the top of the age pyramid will certainly continue to be felt until the middle of the next century. While it represents progress for individuals -due to better nutrition, improved hygiene, better health care and the longevity generally associated with good health-, this evolution is changing society.

The average age is steadily rising, creating a gap in relations with other age groups. This trend, which is expected to accelerate in coming years, will have a considerable impact on the financing of old-age benefits and on working life. Indeed, all our systems, conventions and legal notions reside on a generational contract based on the principle that the structure of the population corresponds to a well-proportioned pyramid.

It is regrettable that society takes a negative view of this development, speaking of the "ageing" of the population. It would be more appropriate to seize the opportunities this process offers and to draw the appropriate conclusions. It is important to deal with the consequences of this change.

A. Discrimination against older persons

A well-meaning policy, but one that proved to be erroneous, sought to reduce high unemployment among young people by giving older and experienced workers the possibility of ending their careers before retirement age. But older workers have a great store of experience and specific social qualifications, strengths vital to increasing economic prosperity and which must not go unused. Because, in a few years, there is expected to be a shortage of qualified workers, a trend already showing up in certain sectors moreover, and there will therefore once again be an imperative need for the experience of our generation.

So it is time to stop promoting ill-advised programmes for letting older workers go. On the contrary, we need solutions enabling them to give up their work partially, on a voluntary basis, and in terms of their wishes and their vitality, to make room for young people, or on the contrary, to extend their careers if that corresponds to their plans or their employer's possibilities. It is primarily for companies themselves and the social partners to explore such possibilities and to stop discriminating against the elderly. To do so, companies have a wide range of measures at their disposal, such as changing the way work is organised, expanding further training possibilities or making working hours more flexible. The strengths of the different categories of age - the thirst for knowledge of young people and the experience of older workers- can thus be combined in such a way as to complement each other and contribute to an innovative and productive result.

To improve the professional opportunities of older workers and simultaneously give them the necessary motivation, the "deficit age model " must be put to rest. Each individual ages differently and the development of skills is not limited to any specific period of life. The decisive element in enabling an older jobless person to return to a

suitable job is correct evaluation of his potential by the employer. So incentive measures are needed that make it possible to put new performance profiles to good use. Flexible forms of work and possibilities of group work, for example, have shown their merit in terms of the organisation of work. But we need to go further, to experiment and promote innovative concepts, a task to which the European Social Funds could make a major contribution. In any event, our generation is not just a mass that can be rejected or reintegrated in terms of the employment situation. We cannot and must not tolerate such discrimination.

B. The recognition of volunteering

Likewise, the possibilities of placing one's knowledge and experience at the service of young people through a voluntary non-professional activity -providing advice on business start-up or development, sharing professional and life experience, offering service and assistance- are acceptable alternatives only if society is prepared to recognise these services correctly. In the long run, the voluntary worker will feel exploited. Political officials must therefore match voluntary activities with guarantees, not necessarily financial in nature, but at least in the area of social security. It is out of the question that a person who suffers injury within the framework of his voluntary activities should also have to bear the costs of the accident. In a society based on performance, when all is said and done only the market value of activities is recognised. So we need to work together to ensure that the voluntary activities of our generation are also recognised by the other generations. There are still serious shortcomings and great obstacles in this area that political leaders must absolutely eliminate.

C. The isolation of senior citizens

Another illusion of our affluent society consists of working from the principle that the term "senior citizens" designates a uniform social category made up of quiet pensioners characterised by their physical fitness, mobility, cultural interests and social commitment, enjoying the necessary social guarantees, part of a loving family and with a wide circle of acquaintances. But we all know that our generation is not "one size fits all": some still work, others have retired, some have a sufficient income and are socially integrated, others do not have a satisfactory working life or sufficient guarantees and feel isolated and excluded. In a society characterised by the division of labour, the time of family relations in the broad sense and, consequently, of integration into this family circle, is behind us. This is a reality that we can rightfully regret, but that we cannot ignore. We cannot continue nurturing an ideal that no longer exists. We must make officials and decision-makers understand that the changes in society have led to the isolation and alienation of a large number of individuals. Reintegration into society and the co-existence of the different generations also depends on the existence of an infrastructure that promotes integration. Senior citizens must live in a context enabling them to maintain their autonomy as long as possible and to keep up their social contacts.

D. The importance of social integration

The intermingling of the generations is only possible if the necessary infrastructure exists to allow it to happen. This means that senior citizens must have not simply satisfactory housing but a wide range of possibilities of housing, of different sizes and levels, designed in such a way that the young and the less young can live together on good terms, and of mobility possibilities that eliminate the obstacle of distance. Mobility is nonetheless closely linked to the individual state of health. Something that needs to be taken into account in this respect is that health is a question not only of

physical fitness, but also and most importantly, of personal well-being. From the purely physical point of view, prevention, the existence of mobile health care services and, in general, primary health care are particularly important. In a global view, psychosocial services play an essential role.

I am well aware that I have addressed only a few of the aspects and problems faced by senior citizens, the difficulties assailing us all and which will continue to concern us. To conclude, I would nevertheless like to point out that, thanks to the initiative of certain national associations of senior citizens, an initiative I warmly welcome, our European Senior Union has come into existence. With great commitment and energy, it denounces the political failings of the past and fights to defend our rights. This initiative, for example, led the Commission to develop a programme of actions and a directive to combat discrimination against older persons. These texts are the subject of a European Parliament report in which my fellow Member and rapporteur, Thomas Mann, of Germany, explicitly requests provisions against the discrimination from which older persons suffer in working life.

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