



European Year for Active Ageing 2012

Questions & Answers

What is the demographic context?

The European Union is in a process of significant population ageing. Europeans today are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. Since 1960, life expectancy has risen by eight years, and demographic projections expect a further five-year increase over the next forty years. This is a historic achievement that deserves to be celebrated.

From 2012 the European working-age population will start to shrink, while the population aged over 60 years will continue to increase by about two million people a year, according to a scenario that assumes continued high levels of immigration and a slight rise in fertility.

According to Eurostat's latest projections released in 2008, there would be only two people of working age (15-64) for every person aged over 65 in the European Union by 2060 compared to a ratio of four to one today. The strongest push in this direction is expected to occur during the period 2015-35 when the baby boom cohorts will be retiring. This shift is due to a combination of low birth rates and rising life expectancy.

Why is active ageing a key opportunity for tackling the challenge of ageing populations?

Population ageing presents both challenges and opportunities. It may increase pressure on public budgets and pension systems, as well as on the staffing of social and care services for older people. Old age is still often associated with illness and dependency, and older people can feel excluded from employment as well as from family and community life. There is a fear that the older generations might become too heavy a burden on younger, working-age people and that this could result in tensions between generations.

This view neglects, however, the significant actual and potential contribution that older people — and the baby-boom cohorts in particular — can make to society. A key opportunity for tackling the challenge of demographic ageing and preserving intergenerational solidarity consists therefore in ensuring that the baby-boom cohorts can stay longer in the labour market, continue to be active participants in society and remain healthy and autonomous as long as possible.

What are the main challenges?

a) Tackling early retirement

In the framework of the Employment Strategy, Member States have started to reverse the trend to early retirement so that the EU-27 employment rate for people aged 55-64 has increased from 36.9% in 2000 to 46% in 2009. Encouraging older workers to stay in employment requires notably the improvement of working conditions and their adaptation to the health status and needs of older workers, updating their skills by providing better access to life long learning and the review of tax and benefit systems to ensure that there are effective incentives for working longer.



b) Combating social exclusion of older people through active participation

Active ageing is also an effective tool for tackling poverty and isolation in old age. In 2008, 19% of people aged 65+ in the European Union were at risk of poverty. A considerable number of older people experience old age as a time of marginalisation. While better employment opportunities for older people could help tackle some of the causes of poverty among this age group, active participation in voluntary activities could reduce the isolation of older people. The huge potential that older persons represent for society as volunteers or carers could be better mobilised by eliminating existing obstacles to unpaid work, by providing the right framework and by adapting to their needs.

A recent survey found that older people are willing to participate in volunteering with nearly half of those who had retired stating that they had already volunteered or that they planned to (Flash Eurobarometer n° 247, 2008). Equally, nearly one in four retired people polled stated that they had already or planned to enrol in education courses. Encouraging older people to acquire new skills will enable them to participate more actively in society.

c) Tackling ill health in older ages

Improving population health is vital for individual and societal well-being. While directly contributing to individual quality of life, a healthy population is also critical for economic growth and prosperity in Europe by enabling people to remain active in society for longer as well as by limiting strain on health and social care systems. However, projections also show that if future gains in life expectancy were generally acquired in good health and without disability, the rise in healthcare spending due to population ageing would be halved.

Many of the illnesses that cause poor health in older age, such as cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes and mental illness, are preventable. Although these conditions may be the outcome of risk factors accumulated over a lifetime, much health gain can still be achieved at older ages. Tackling these chronic illnesses will require a two-fold approach to promote health throughout the lifespan and tackle health inequalities linked to social, economic and environmental factors.

Why a European Year?

The Commission highlighted in its Communication on "Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" the importance of promoting a healthy and active ageing population to help, among other things, achieve high-employment, invest in skills and reduce poverty.

Active ageing needs to be supported by a wide range of policies at all levels of governance. The EU plays its part in such policy areas as employment, public health, information society, transport and social protection, but in the main policy responses on active ageing generally fall within the responsibility of the Member States, which are stepping up their efforts to mobilise the potential of older people.

Joining forces across borders and sharing experience can help national policy makers achieve the goal of active ageing. However, responses received from Member States' national authorities were overwhelmingly supportive of the idea of action at Union level and, in particular, of a European Year. They felt that the European Union could support their endeavours by creating a more supportive environment, with increased awareness among policy makers and the general public, helping to mobilise policy makers and stakeholders at all levels, supporting mutual learning across Europe and helping to define common objectives and targets.



What was the response of stakeholders to the public consultation?

The Commission conducted a public consultation from June to July 2009 on the European Year for Active Ageing. 132 responses from key stakeholders involved at European national and regional level were received. About half of the responses were from civil society organisations, with public authorities making up another quarter of the responses.

Contributors generally considered a European Year on the theme of active ageing an appropriate policy instrument. They appreciated that it would raise awareness of those key themes which would be touched upon by the year, placing them more firmly on political and public policy agendas; it would provide recognition and support for those already working on these topics; it would support the sharing of good practice, and that it would generate innovative approaches as well as new synergies between existing actors. More than once, respondents stated their desire for the European Year to leave a long-term legacy, in part by generating long-lasting initiatives. Respondents of all types showed a great willingness to be involved in a European Year, indicating activities they were planning to hold which could feed into such a year as well as proposing additional projects.

What is the overall objective?

The proposed European Year for Active Ageing is designed to serve as a framework for raising awareness, for identifying and disseminating good practice and, more importantly, encouraging policymakers and stakeholders at all levels to facilitate active ageing. The aim is to invite these players to commit to specific action and goals in the run-up year 2011 so that tangible achievements can be presented during the European Year itself in 2012.

Commitments in view of the European Year can relate to many areas. Any public or private body can make commitments, and these may range from legislative reform, to analysis or public debate to raise awareness or identifying priorities for action.

The Commission will set up already in the first half of 2011 a website for the European Year which will collect and present information on plans for measures and initiatives to be implemented at all levels across the EU in the context of the European Year. Policy makers and stakeholders will be invited to publicise the commitments they want to enter into on this website.

How does the planned European Year 2012 build on existing Union programmes?

The European Union has already taken various initiatives to promote active ageing (employment strategy, ESF, PROGRESS, Grundtvig programme for adult education, public health programme, European action plan for "Ageing well in the information society").

These activities should benefit from an enhanced visibility in the context of the European Year. Many of the existing policies and instruments can be geared towards the goals of the European Year so that projects with an active ageing dimension can get some financial support from the EU (research, conferences, seminars, exchange of experience).

A specific funding programme for the European Year is not foreseen.



How will Member States and other stakeholders get involved?

The success of the European Year on active ageing will depend on the involvement and commitment of the other European institutions, Member States and other stakeholders at all levels.

The Council adopted on 7 June 2010 **Conclusions on Active Ageing** in which Member States expressed its willingness to encourage regional and local authorities, the social partners and other stakeholders to commit themselves to the objective of active ageing and to launch the necessary initiatives.

Member States will appoint a national coordinator responsible for organising its involvement in the European Year and for ensuring that national activities are properly coordinated. The Commission will convene meetings of the national coordinators in order to coordinate at European level the implementation of the Year and to exchange information regarding the activities at national level. Coordination at Union level shall also be a matter for the existing policy committees and advisory groups (e.g. Social Protection Committee, Employment Committee, Experts Group on Demographic Issues).

The Commission will also convene meetings of representatives of European organisations or bodies working in the field of active ageing, which would advise the Commission on the implementation of the European Year.

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