

vlaamse  
jeugdraad

DG EMPL - CAD A/	05062
Date:	07 -03- 2006
CF:	E
C:	ON

Brussels, 1 March 2006

**Concerning: Policy paper from the Flemish Youth council:**

**in reference to the Green Paper on demographic change: Towards a new intergenerational solidarity**

Dear,

Hereby you'll find a policy paper from the Flemish Youth Council, agreed on 1 February 2006. This policy paper was also sent to all Flemish Ministers.

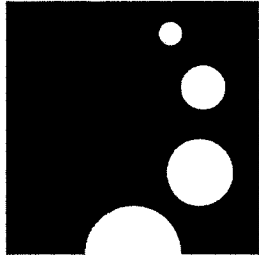
With this paper, we hope to give an input for a debate on the issue. Of course, we're ready to give more explanation about this paper.

Enjoy reading the paper!  
Kind regards,

Flemish Youth Council,

Pepijn Debosscher

Vlaamse Jeugdraad  
Arenbergstraat 1d  
1000 Brussel  
02 551 13 68 / 0485 506559  
[pepijn.debosscher@vlaamsejeugdraad.be](mailto:pepijn.debosscher@vlaamsejeugdraad.be)



vlaamse  
**jeugdraad**

<b>FLEMISH YOUTH COUNCIL</b>	
<b>DATE 1 febr 2006</b>	<b>ADVISORY 06/06</b>

**Advisory in reference to the Green Paper: Demographic Change: Towards a New Intergenerational Solidarity**

The Flemish Youth Council meeting on **February 1, 2006**, headed by Stefaan Marien, publishes following advisory:

## **1. Introduction**

---

In Europe, we speak of White Papers and Green Papers. Youth White Papers are most common to us, and with which we are most familiar. We are present at their very inception; from Day 1. Out of this came the *method of open coordination* as well as the goals we hold together of Youth Information, Participation, Volunteer Work and Knowledge. In various advisories, we have submitted our respective opinions. In addition, there are other policy documents that influence the living environment of youth and children in Flanders, e.g. The Lisbon Strategy, The Youth Pact, etc.

The Green Paper "Demographic Change: Towards a New Intergenerational Solidarity, pertains to youth. Consequently, we reviewed it with much interest, and although it's not yet clear what the next step in this process should be, we still wish to share our ideas and thoughts on the subject.

To be perfectly clear, we will provide definitions of both White- and Green Papers

- Green Papers are published by the Commission to reflect upon certain policy areas. These documents are predominantly meant for concerned parties who are urged to participate in the discussion process. In some cases, they are written based upon subsequent developments in the lawmaking process.
- White Papers are documents dealing with certain, specific measures related to a certain subject. They are sometimes attached to a Green Paper and meant to initiate discussion on

a European level. In Green Papers, a number of ideas are put forth to stimulate open discussion and debate. Conversely, White Papers contain a certain number of suggestions for a certain policy topic; the purpose is to further revise these suggestions.

## **2. The Purpose of This Advisory**

---

### **2.1 The world is aging**

In 2003, the growth rate of the European population measured a mere .04%. In some member states, this number was even negative.<sup>1</sup> In a large number of countries, growth was attributable to immigration. The fertility rate has reached a point where it is lower than the "replacement level" in all areas.<sup>2</sup>

Up through 2025, the European population is expected to increase only slightly through immigration, after which, a steady decline is expected.<sup>3</sup> This decline is steeper and faster when examining the population between the ages of 15 and 64. Between 2005 and 2030, this number is expected to drop by 20.8 million persons.

So in the future, the labor force in our society will be made up of many more older workers and fewer youth. The transitions between different phases in life is already becoming more complex; young adults are going through these transitions later and later in life. (Graduation, first job, first child, etc.) This aging of our society will affect more than just retirement and pension plans, financial and social stability; it will also influence the spirit of entrepreneurship and economic initiative.

To prepare for this shift in the labor force demographic, the Union has stressed the importance of increases in labor participation, investment, productivity, innovation and research. There must also be a new type of intergenerational solidarity developed through mutual support and through transferring skills and experience from one generation to the next.

**Many issues relating to this demographic shift are subject to the competence of individual member states, their regional authorities and/or social partners. It is clear that progress here must include a discussion concerning youth and young people. Needless to say, we very much wish to be involved in this discussion at every level.**

### **2.2 Changing of the guard**

Today's children and youth are being asked to replace larger generations in the workforce. On average, they are more educated than preceding generations: in 2003 nearly 28% of 25-34 year-olds in the EU-15 held diplomas of higher education vs. only 16% of those between the ages of 55-64. The Union needs to understand that its youth is becoming a scarce commodity and one that is not being used to its potential. **Our present-day youth encounters numerous problems:**

---

<sup>1</sup> In all new member states except Cyprus and Malta, population growth rate was negative in 2003. (Green Paper, p.2)

<sup>2</sup> The fertility rate (approx. 2.1 children per woman,) has dropped to under 1.5 children per woman in many member states.

<sup>3</sup> Preliminary model of the Eurostat? population prognosis. Dec. 2004

- In December of 2004, unemployment for those under the age of 25 measured 17.9%. The rate was 7.7% for those over 25.
- Young people are often victims of age discrimination or may be passed over because of a lack of work experience. The discriminatory effects can be exacerbated through other factors such as gender, race and social status which also problematic in these persons' general assimilation into society.
- The skills integrated into our educational systems do not consistently meet the needs of our knowledge-society. School dropout rates also continue to be alarming. In 2002, approximately 16.5% of 18-24 year-olds left school without a diploma. There are many diverse causes for this trend; a trend that could be limited by measures taken to support families with school-age children together with a modernization of the present educational systems.
- Above all, children are open and vulnerable to becoming victims of poverty. This is a reality for 19% of children under 15 years old. The risk is greater for children in single-parent households, and is a reason that many children drop out of school. This leads to even higher risks of poverty in the mid- to long-term future.

### 3. Keys for Solutions

---

In order for the Lisbon Process to succeed, the EU must identify ambitious goals very soon. If Europe hopes to become the most competitive knowledge-society, there must be opportunity, aid and sufficient support for our youth. Along with these, there will also need to be a substantial budget provided for research and innovation.

The European Youth Pact, (as accepted by the European Top in March,) has been approved at the highest political level. It identifies youth as an important role-player. This is a very encouraging beginning, but at the same time, this is no more than a small step in a long process. Our thoughts on the Youth Pact and our ideas on a practical follow through are in Advisories 05/09 and 05/18.

Young people must have opportunities **now** in order to lead a full life in the future and to contribute to democracy, stability and well-being in our society. It is the task of the member states (**all** the member states,) and the EU to make these opportunities available. If we hope to build the type of society described in the Lisbon Strategy, there must be more investment in our youth.

In addition to "knowledge-society," we wish to speak of a "knowledge-community": a community where there are ample opportunities for everyone and where the phenomenon of unqualified students leaving school is completely eradicated. Equal opportunity is a starting point, and education should be seen more holistically: teaching methods that evolve with the labor market **and** with society.

In a fast-changing environment, both formal and informal learning are important. We envision a sort of **cross pollination; with a strong link between education and the labor market, as well as between formal and informal educational methods.**

We believe in the validity of the ideas for higher education put forth in the "Bologna Process" – A Compatible Learning Plan. We are concerned about the current unconnectedness between the educational and professional sectors. Both sectors would benefit from educational policy designed to meet the needs of each.

A policy to effectively educate and inform young people concerning the professional sector and the working world must meet several requirements: the policy must be uniform, consistent and clear – not laced with exceptions.

We understand “**transition counselling**” to be the counselling of young people in their search for work. Transition counselling is the introduction of work-seeker into the labor market through a step-by-step process that reconciles the aims of the work-seeker with the reality of the labor market. This must be tailored to each individual on a case-by-case basis.

In order to reach its potential, transition counselling must begin on the line between education and work. We recommend quality transition counselling be provided by educational institutions during school hours in the form of counselling in the **choice of a field of study or as job orientation**. Every young person should be completely prepared for the implications of his or her choice to continue with further education or to enter the labor market. For part-time students, a “**pre-transition**” (part-time education / part-time training,) is a possible option.

We recommend a contact point with counselling be tailored on an individual scale; intensively for some, more passively for others, depending on each person’s individual needs. Throughout your entire work term, you’d be able to fall back on the help of a counsellor. Participation, of course, would be voluntary.

Consolidation of the presently uncoordinated efforts will result in consistent and unambiguous policy. An initiative like “the workshop” is definitely a step in the right direction, but we should be looking to optimize our efforts.

The mobility of the work force should increase if we indeed strive for a European labor market. Hopefully naming 2006, “The Year of Worker Mobility” will get the ball rolling. And in speaking of worker mobility, we cannot ignore the obstacles that currently exist that prevent this from being a reality, namely long and expensive visa processes. In Advisory 04/21, this is addressed in greater depth. In dealing with a European Labor Market, we’d like to stress the importance of keeping the **interests of the individual and the reality of the Euro-regions** in mind.

We believe entrepreneurship should be encouraged. If we can eliminate unnecessary obstacles, more and more young people will be likely to create their own independent entrepreneurship. And if an endeavor fails on the first try, we should seek to minimize any stigma of failure.

Harder and longer work hours are not the magic solution. Young people aren’t necessarily opposed to working longer hours, but they prefer a flexible work schedule to a fixed schedule, where work periods are alternated with time off in various forms. Time off must be treated as a standard right of workers, and not as a reward or favor given by the employer.

We’ve determined that the cost of living for young people is higher at the same period that their earnings are lower.

In the **Belgian Generational Pact**, there are regulations pertaining to older workers. There are also several for young workers, but they are not linked. It wasn’t formulated as an intergenerational policy; as it stands now, it is just a collection of measures and standards. We request a more consistent policy; one that considers and addresses the beginning, middle and end phases of the labor time-line.

#### **4. Intergenerational Solidarity**

---

#### **4.1. Higher employment rates for everyone**

There are many willing workers at both the young and old ends of the labor spectrum who simply can't find jobs. Both generations are common victims of age discrimination. Other forms of discrimination may be based on gender, physical disabilities, religious beliefs or sexual orientation.

We support a Europe free of discrimination, where everyone is free to reach their highest potential and lead a full life; where everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute and be an integral part of society.

One answer to the aging question in our society is a broader participation of more Europeans in an open labor market with safer working environments. In order to achieve this goal, there must be guidelines and regulations to eliminate discrimination and to allow our society as a whole to reach its potential. We are happy with the proposal from the European Commission to christen 2007, "The Year of Equal Opportunity for All." We hope this year becomes one of historical significance in the battle against discrimination in the work-place.

Immigration will play a big role in the short-term replenishment of the vacancies in the workforce created by larger and larger numbers of retirees. All Member States should provide immigrant workers with the same rights guaranteed to their citizens. We are concerned about the current situation where young immigrants are often victimized by various forms of discrimination. We are re-examining on the issue of economic migration with the Green Paper published on January 11, 2005 as our starting point.

Proper policy to improve the quality of the workplace is a necessary step to improving productivity. Consideration of safety and health standards in the workplace as well as the balance between vocation and family life are specific ways of improving working conditions.

As noted in the commission's memo on "European Policies Concerning Youth," published on May 30, 2005, youth are a priority in the Mutual Labor Learning Program in 2005. We request that the European Youth Forum be involved in the "European Employment Strategy" to represent the interests of youth in Europe.

#### **4.2. One European social policy**

European demographic evolution is a challenge, not only in the realm of economic development, but also in the context of social services and community. From 2005 to 2030, the number of people of employable age (15-64,) is projected to drop by 20.8 million. Additionally, the demographic dependency ratio, (number of residents aged 0-14 combined with the number of residents over 65 divided by the number of residents between 15-64,) is expected to rise from 49% in 2005 to 66% in 2030. This aging of society demands that we make improvements to our social services, pension plans and begin a close examination of the costs of improving our healthcare infrastructure. This situation is one of the biggest challenges ahead for the European youth of today.

How can the current principles and guarantees within European social policy be kept, even as they evolve to accommodate a new and different 21st century? It is essential that youth and youth organizations be actively involved in discussions and in the decision-making process. "Europe" is moving forward, but social standards and services are lagging behind.

The Flemish Youth Council advocates a broad discussion and examination of the pension system with full participation of representatives of both the young and the elderly. This could be realised through reviewing the "Open Method of Coordination on Pensions," (already functional on a Europe-wide level since 2001,) and streamlining it with the "Open Method of Coordination on Social Inclusion/Social Protection" in 2006. An integrated and coherent policy is an unconditional necessity.

We do not dispute the fact that a large percentage of the elderly population exists at a high economic risk, predominantly due to having stayed at home to raise children and never having accrued social security through working. These current conditions, instead of encouraging families to have one stay-at-home parent, lead to "social non-recognition."<sup>4</sup> We'd like to encourage the introduction of social benefits for non-working parents in order to protect rather than penalize families who choose to have one parent at home full-time to raise children.

We'd also like to emphasise the importance of greater availability of childcare and an improved harmony between work and family life for both women and men. This includes, among other things, an enhancement of the leave provisions for both women *and* men when a baby is born.

We support a retirement pension policy that assures the elderly of the means to live comfortably and respectably. Development of care facilities for the elderly can also be a source of jobs for young people.

We imagine an "**Intergenerational Plan for Solidarity**" in which European social policy will take into account the demographic evolution that has taken place in recent years. Ideally, the demographic theme would not be viewed as a conflict between young and old, but as a way to promote bonding between generations.

This new plan requires more efficient monetary investment and more effective youth policy. In national reform planning, a strong focus on youth-oriented themes is crucial. The European Commission should examine the actions taken by Member States in the context of the European Youth Pact and youth autonomy, judge the results, and use this information to revise current policy.

#### **4.3. Learning from each other**

Each year more and more Europeans reach retirement age and leave the workforce. It would be a costly loss if the knowledge held by these people were to vanish with them and not be passed on to younger generations. To avoid this; we support the institution of a sort of "intergenerational educational plan."

This plan could be a work-sharing plan involving those workers who are nearing retirement age and young workers who are just entering the field. The older worker would work fewer hours as he passes on his knowledge to his younger colleague. This would not only serve to pass on valuable information, but it would also create a bond and understanding between different generations. This is but one potential plan that could be introduced to help create ties between young and old.

---

<sup>4</sup> In 1996, 50% of women in Europe expressed that they had to make a choice between working and having children.

#### 4.4. A ban on contraception?

The change in the European birth rate is something that must be discussed. However, this shouldn't be the sole theme addressed by European policy makers. **The biggest problem we face is that the youth of today are not receiving the necessary opportunities to live their "ideal" lives.** We are adamant in calling for policy which considers youth as a participant of full and equal value in society. In order to contribute to social and economic renewal as specified in the Lisbon Strategy, basic needs must be met. Someone who is homeless, unemployed or without a decent life will not usually be especially proactive about improving the general living environment.

The youth of today face many challenges and problems. Poverty,<sup>5</sup> unemployment, unsafe working environments or the chances of being left without benefits. In some European countries the younger generation is forced to postpone "adulthood." One cause of this could be the choice of a longer or more multifaceted study program at university. Generally, (with exceptions in certain regions,) young people are living with their parents longer simply because it's unaffordable for them to live alone. It's becoming rarer and rarer for young people to move out to live together with a partner simply because it's too expensive for many.<sup>6</sup> If and when they actually do it, it's at an older age than in the past.

**Young people must have opportunities today to build a decent life for tomorrow and to be ready and able to contribute to democracy, stability and prosperity in our society. It is the duty of all the Member States in the EU to provide these opportunities.**

In the Youth White Paper, we were presented with the term "Youth Autonomy." Youth Autonomy could play a major role in turning a negative feedback loop into one with a positive effect on our society.

It is extremely important for us to progress on the basis of the advisory published by the European Commission on May 26, 2004 (subsequent to the ideas set forth in the White Paper, "A New Impetus for European Youth,") and erect expert workgroups on the subject of "youth autonomy." Research on youth autonomy began in July, 2005 – this is but the first step in a long process – and we anxiously await results of this research.

In striving to come up with a **definition of "youth autonomy,"** we believe that the concepts of "empowerment" and that of a "competence approach" are crucial. **Granting "autonomy" means more to us than simply financial assistance. Well-being is much more than an economic state; it's about feeling good about yourself and has as much to do with social factors as well.**

- **Competence Approach** comes out of the realisation that youth and children are very capable. It's about addressing their specific abilities and providing appropriate opportunities to them. Obviously, there is a **learning curve**, and the form and amount of participation will depend heavily on the specific age and capabilities of these children and young people. We should seek a healthy balance between giving young people their due responsibility while also protecting them and still allowing them to be young – with room to experiment and the opportunity to fall and to stand back up again.

It is the government's responsibility to provide the basic needs for youth such as education, healthcare, youth organizations and a safe living environment. In other

---

<sup>5</sup> 19% of 16-24 year-olds in 2004

<sup>6</sup> The Green Paper measured the difference between the number of children desired (2.3) and the actual number of children had (1.5).



words, a practical provision for children's rights. It is also a duty of the government to address that subset of today's youth that are especially vulnerable and to offer them extra protection and assistance. The government should also be wary of being too quick to make a problem out of the youth-behaviour. They are also called to watch over and ensure that youth and children are given a legitimate right to participate; i.e. **"the right to do and participate in decisions which will have an effect on their living situation, and therefore, an effect on society as a whole."**

- Youth policy plays the foremost role in guaranteeing this participation. Because the word "participation" is such a broad term, we'd like to emphasise the essence of what is meant in this context. In our estimation, it is about **"empowerment."** Empowerment is the process by which people, (in this case, youth,) begin to grasp and understand the important issues that affect their lives.

As children and young people are all different, so can this process take many different shapes and forms. It strives for a equal balance between young people and the elderly with complete respect for the diversity evident in youth as well as adults. There are clear responsibilities for all involved.

Empowerment and autonomy are very strongly connected.

*Definition according to the Flemish Youth Council:*

*By autonomy, we mean empowerment as the process by which people, (in this case, children and youth,) begin to grasp and understand the important issues that affect their lives.*

*As children and young people are each different, so can this process take many different shapes and forms. It strives for a equal balance between young people and the elderly with complete respect for the diversity evident in youth as well as adults. There are clear responsibilities for all involved.*

## **5. Conclusion**

---

We do not want to become the victims of our own evolution in Europe. We want to confidently welcome the future and work together to decide how best to shape it.

Policy makers must ensure that there are sufficient means, support and opportunity for young people to reach their full potential, both now and in the future. On every political level, more must be invested in our youth. In so doing, not only the needs of youth will be met, but we'll be simultaneously laying the foundation for a happier and more united Europe.

Youth organisations and young people play an important role in the development of policy that pertains to the realities of work, education, financial security, social security... **The input and involvement of groups which will be affected by the results are necessary for effective policy-making.**

The aging of our society is without a doubt one of the biggest challenges facing not only policy makers, but also the elderly – and especially the younger – generations; today and in the future. This latter group is generally not consulted in addressing the aging of society, yet by all counts, they will be a large role-player in any solution. The Flemish Youth Council wants to make it clear that youth and young persons not only can, but *must* take part in this debate. Also important to remember is that it's everyone's responsibility to work together in facing this challenge; policy makers, civil society and everyday citizens.

Therefore, the Flemish Youth Council has elected to work on this particular task over the next three years; with respect for older generations, and with the necessary self-awareness to realize that for youth and young people, much depends upon the outcome of this debate. Both opportunities and danger hang in the balance. We seek stability for *everyone* in both the goals and the solutions to this issue; now and especially for future generations.

We believe that more opportunities must be created to encourage more interaction and contact between generations. Simply a better acquaintance and understanding between young and old would be a huge step forward. Respect and understanding is the foundation upon which solidarity between generations can be built and developed. A mutual concern can be an effective way to move forward and improve in a time when indifference is a problem.

The European demographic theme should also be viewed from a worldwide perspective. Europe's ambition to develop the world's largest knowledge-economy is a worthy goal, but it must not be at the expense of other countries and continents.