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Green Paper on Demographic Change
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HEADQUARTERS
Health & Social Services

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Ort, 29 August 2005

Green Paper on Demographic Change

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Dear Sir/Madame,

Hereby I forward to you the comments concerning the Green Paper on Demographic Change on behalf of the Red Cross European Union Office, which represents the National Red Cross Societies to the EU institutions.

For any further information and clarification please contact Ms Nathalie Marchioro Holzer, Programme Officer, Red Cross/EU Office, Rue Belliard 65, bte 7, 1040 Brussels. Tel. +32 (0)2 235 0680. E-mail: Nathalie.marchioro@redcross-eu.net

With kind regards,

Monika Wild

Head of Health and Social Services Department



Red Cross / EU Office
Bureau Croix-Rouge / UE

Brussels, 29 August 2005

Subject:
European Commission Green Paper "Confronting demographic change: A new solidarity between the generations"

Opinion of the National Red Cross Societies of the EU Member States and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) and the National Red Cross Societies of the EU Member States (EUNS), welcome the initiative of the European Commission to address the issue of demographic change. We share the EU concerns on the effects that demographic change is having and will increasingly have on EU Member States. However, we consider that the approach developed in the Green paper mainly focuses on the economic aspects of this challenge and neglects the humanitarian problems. Therefore, in order to be able to address all potential consequences that this demographic trend can have, we recommend that a more holistic approach should be taken.

We appreciate the opportunity to express our opinions and to share our recommendations on measures to alleviate the negative consequences of demographic change in Europe in order to contribute to the improvement of the situation of the growing number of elderly people in Europe.

From a humanitarian perspective we feel the need to give stronger protection to the people whose vulnerability would most likely be increased by demographic change and therefore we would like to express the following recommendations based on the elements put forward in the Green Paper:

1. THE CHALLENGES FOR EUROPEAN DEMOGRAPHY

1.1. The challenge of low birth rate

We agree that the public authorities should develop strategies to reconcile family life and employment and improve the balance between employment and other activities but we would like to underline that the decision to have children is based on a wide range of economic, social and psychological reasons and we should avoid a situation where women feel under pressure to have more children. Public authorities should keep in mind that a policy that would increase birth rate is a long term one. Its effects on the labour market, the economy and the social and health systems would not be felt before a long period of time. Therefore, other "more immediate" solutions should be thought of, as for example, strategies related to the preservation of efficient social and health care systems or the development of a sustainable immigration policy.

We also would like to warn the public authorities about the effects of flexible working arrangements concerning the equality between men and women. Part time jobs are often low paid, insecure and usually occupied by women. A policy aiming at promoting reconciliation between family life and work should not only be based on flexible working arrangements but also on splitting the family work and childcare.



1.2. The possible contribution of immigration:

We agree that migration, as a complement of other policies, can play an important part in counterbalancing the effects of demographic change. We urge the EU to put migrants' views, interests and dignity at the centre of the future EU economic migration policy.

- In past decades migration could partly compensate for low fertility rates in European countries. In order to be able to improve the trend in European populations' current age structure it will be necessary to encourage migration. Migrants ought to be given the chance to integrate fully into the host society and should have the opportunity to acquire after some time the same rights as EU citizens. We therefore:
 - support the European Parliament's call addressed to the Member States to ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their families.¹
 - insist on the need to incorporate a co-development strategy in the future EU economic migration policy to avoid that the development of our society causes harm to third countries.
 - believe that integration and the promotion of tolerance are the cornerstones of a successful economic migration policy.²

2. A NEW SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

2.1. Better integration of young people

We are satisfied that the situation of young people is taken into consideration in the debate on demographic change and we strongly encourage the Member States to adopt concrete measures in line with the European Youth Pact.

- We agree with the global approach promoted by the European Youth Pact and consider that mainstreaming youth policy in all areas is essential to achieving the objectives of the document.
- Youth initiatives at local, regional, national and transnational level should be supported to promote active citizenship and capacity building.
- Consultation of young people and youth organisations should be as large as possible and should take different forms as youth is a very diverse group consisting of people from various economic, social and cultural backgrounds and contexts.
- In the future the burden on younger people to finance the social and health systems could drastically increase. Therefore it will be necessary to conceive of ways to enable them to carry this burden and to support them as much as possible.

¹ European Parliament Resolution on the EU's priorities and recommendations for the 61st session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, pt 22.

² The Red Cross position on the future EU economic migration policy is available upon request or on the EC website.



2.2. A global approach to the working life cycle

We urge the EU to mainstream anti-discrimination in all its policies to ensure that the interests of the different groups of society are respected. Discrimination on the basis of age can be reduced through the promotion of intergenerational dialogue and the strengthening of legal measures in this field. We therefore encourage the EU to support the development of structured programmes that brings together different generations.

- To address and speak up about discrimination against older people and to develop advocacy for the elderly are essential tasks in the years to come. In order to be able to guarantee social inclusion and to prevent social inequalities based on age, societies must strive to ensure that all policies and practices uphold and guarantee the rights of all people, regardless of age. Advocacy and ethical decision-making must be central strategies in all programmes, practices, policies and research on ageing.
- Intergenerational solidarity and mutual interdependence is a matter of main concern to all generations. The negative image of the elderly, especially of the very old and elderly who need care as a financial burden has to be replaced by the acknowledgement of a two-way giving and receiving between the older and younger generations. Older people continue to be a vital resource to their families and communities. Therefore it would be helpful to provide connecting structures, like housing in communities that encourage daily social interaction and interdependence between generations.
- The real challenge for the EU seems to be securing a sufficient level of social security and welfare despite the changes brought about by demographic change. Making people work longer is presented as inevitable. This solution is only thinkable if the working conditions are good, if the employers are ready to hire elderly people and if incentive measures are adopted to motivate people to stay longer in the labour market.

2.3. A new place for "elderly people":

It is time for a new paradigm, one that views older people as active participants and active contributors to a functioning society. The role of elderly people in society should be recognised and valued in order to put an end to the negative image that is associated with them.

As a volunteer organisation, we are aware of the support that volunteers can bring to vulnerable people and to the community in general. We, therefore, ask the EU institutions to facilitate and promote voluntary work and contribute to the harmonisation of legislation in this field.

- If ageing is to be a positive experience, longer life must be accompanied by continued opportunities for health, participation and security³. Active ageing aims to extend healthy life expectancy and the quality of life of people as they age, including those most vulnerable and in need of care. We support the recommendations of the WHO in its report on active ageing and we also consider that a key task in today's society is to ensure continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civil affairs.

³ *Active Ageing, a policy framework*, WHO, April 2002



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- Elderly people are a valuable, but underestimated resource within our society. Concentrating only on the formal labour market has as a consequence that the contributions we gain from older people through informal work and voluntary activities are neglected. Elderly people often support their families in households and with childcare, which enables younger adults to join the formal labour market. Even in countries with well-developed family policies elderly people play an important role in supporting families with practical help.
- Skilled and experienced older people act as volunteers in schools, communities, health and social welfare organisations. Voluntary work benefits older people by increasing their social contacts and psychological well being while making a significant contribution to their communities. Only when a holistic and full participation of elderly people is supported, are citizens able to make a productive contribution to society in both remunerated and non-remunerated activities as they age.
- The negative image of elderly people being a financial burden for the social security system has to be questioned in public. Their skills and experience need to be recognised and harnessed. There is a need to put into focus their valuable contribution towards society through their informal and voluntary work. The media, political actors and other stakeholders, such as the Red Cross, need to accept their responsibility as advocates and lead in forming a new and more positive image of ageing. Recognition of the contributions that older people make will support this new image and help to question negative stereotypes.
- We consider that the opportunity to acquire new skills should be made available for elderly people at a reasonable price.

2.4. Solidarity with the very elderly:

To avoid social exclusion of the very elderly and to ensure that they will receive the social services they need, solidarity with the very elderly is needed. A safe and adapted environment should be guaranteed in order to allow elderly people and independent life as long as possible. We ask the EU to support the initiatives aiming at promoting the autonomy of elderly people, be it through the development of new technologies or through care services.

- In view of the structural shifts in demographics, the increased requirement of care and housing for older and frail people presents new challenges for our society. Society will be forced to deal with a high number of elderly people living alone. This will result in increased demands for housing adjustments and assistance devices, such as electronic alarm systems, to create age-friendly and safe living environments.
- In order to improve the quality of life for older people it is recommended to develop barrier-free housing options and to make public buildings and transportation accessible for people with disabilities. Supporting their continued independence and inter-dependence by assisting with adaptations to the environment as well as by providing policies, programmes and services that enable people to remain in their homes as they grow older needs to be addressed.

In order to disarm potential conflicts and inequalities we strongly recommend implementing the necessary structures, so that formal care through health and social service systems is equally accessible to all. Furthermore we recommend strengthening the support to informal caregivers.



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- The greatest challenge with an aging population is to strike a balance in the health policy. Generally care is provided by informal carers, such as family members, friends and neighbours (most of whom are women). During recent decades the traditional family structures have changed. Recent demographic trends within the EU indicate the increase in the proportion of childless women, changes in divorce and marriage patterns and the overall much smaller number of children, which contributes to a shrinking pool of family support. This situation results in an economical challenge for society to cope with the imbalance between the decreasing working population and the increasing number of elderly in need of social and medical services. Additionally further issues, such as older people who are poor and who live in rural areas having limited or no access to the required health care. A decline in State support for primary health care services in many areas has put increased strain on older people and their families. We consider that families, as informal carers, should be supported through counselling services and through the development of health and social care services which are equally accessible.
- We emphasise that the services should be equally accessible, as this is a key element in order to avoid social exclusion of the elderly.

In general we emphasise that through demographic change it might become very difficult to recruit volunteers (young and elderly people) on the same scale as today because they simply could be unable to afford voluntary service. Working as a volunteer requires free time as well as energy and both could become scarce commodities for many young and elderly people when demographic change takes effect. Therefore a well-balanced mix of different measures is required to prevent or mitigate this negative effect of demographic change. In light of the many vital services and achievements that volunteers today provide to European countries' health and social systems free of charge it would be very unwise to ignore or even initiate developments that might endanger these benefits and would cause an additional financial burden for these already strained systems.

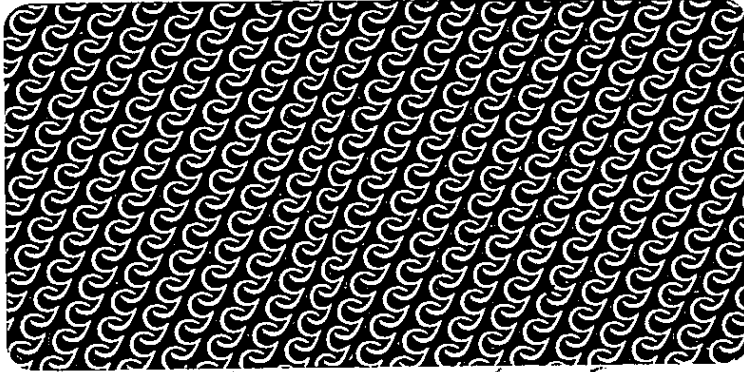
To conclude, we would like to stress the complexity of this debate. We recommend the public authorities to develop a more holistic approach which goes beyond the economy and employment aspects of the question, in order to avoid as much as possible policies that would have negative side-effects for social cohesion, intergenerational solidarity or gender equality. We encourage the EU to promote exchanges and regular analysis of demographic change and its impact on societies. Moreover, we consider that policy thinking should involve the different levels of stakeholders concerned: local and national authorities, civil society, the private sector and the citizens. The differences between the Member States and the cultural sensitivities should not be neglected.


The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) and the National Red Cross Societies of the EU Member States (EUNS) are involved in the various sectors concerned by the debate on demographic change (social and health care, anti-discrimination, youth, education, training, employment, volunteering, migration). We would be very pleased to be involved in future debates on this issue and contribute with our experience and expertise gained through our activities in the field.

This opinion has been prepared by the Red Cross/European Union Office, which represents the National Red Cross Societies of the EU Member States and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to the EU institutions. For any further information and clarification please contact Ms Nathalie Marchioro Holzer, Programme Officer, Red Cross/EU Office, Rue Belliard 65, bte 7, 1040 Brussels. Tel.: +32 (0)2 235 06 80. E-mail: Nathalie.Marchioro@redcross-eu.net



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