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**Assembly of European Region's (AER) response to the contents of the Green Paper
'Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations'.**

Adopted at the Plenary Session in 's-Hertogenbosch (Noord-Brabant-NL) on the 14th October 2005

As the political and executive voice of the regions, the AER is a key partner in policy areas that relate to regional competence. Demographic developments play an important role in the policy process with regard to housing, welfare, care, work, education and leisure. These aspects are related either directly or indirectly to regional policy.

Recently, the AER has focused intensively on demographic challenges. It is well known that demographic change is not occurring at the same pace in every region. For example, certain regions in Sweden and Italy are experiencing demographic changes that will not affect regions in the Netherlands for another 15 years. Via its project 'Alive, *European challenge to ageing*', the AER has established a platform for facilitating the exchange of information, best practices, ideas and projects between the regions of Europe. This is the key principle underlying the concept of 'learning regions'.

AER proposed policy objectives

On the basis of its knowledge and experience, the AER wishes to make a number of comments and propose a number of additions to the Green Paper. The AER believes that the EU plays an important role in creating a society that responds appropriately to demographic change. The AER is happy that the European Commission is committed to seeking solutions to demographic challenges, based on a broad perspective. The demographic developments affect not only the healthcare sector and labour market, but also family relationships and solidarity between the generations.

The EU should therefore consider the following in this context:

- We must not focus solely on the problems resulting from demographic change. We must also emphasise the potential and opportunities.
- The formulation of a life-stage policy and family policy should be a priority on the agenda of the EU.
- The regional level is the ideal context in which to establish a platform for facilitating and stimulating the opportunities and challenges resulting from demographic change.
- Innovative strategies are required for dealing with the consequences of demographic change, e.g. to achieve a balance between work and formal/informal care.
- The establishment of a European funding programme that is oriented towards the opportunities resulting from demographic change, stimulates innovative projects, and focuses on young people as well as senior citizens.

Notes on AER policy objectives

The policy objectives proposed by the AER in response to the Green Paper are briefly explained below.

1. Identify the opportunities that demographic change can bring

The AER predicts that, in the decades to come, demographic changes will force us to deal with complex issues. The most important themes are described in the Green Paper. However, in the debate on demographic change, little attention is paid to positive aspects. The AER believes that the positive contribution that senior citizens make to society should be more strongly emphasised and encouraged. Senior citizens have an increasingly important role to play in stimulating the economy (tourism, leisure activities) and reinforcing the social infrastructure (family care, voluntary work).

2. Improving the integration of young people: a matter of taking responsibility...

The AER endorses the necessity of the improved integration of young people in all aspects of society. Social exclusion, for whatever reason, is unacceptable. Major efforts are required to combat school drop-out and failure, and to ensure that young people leave school with a qualification. A good vocational education is the best way to escape poverty. EU policy must also be geared towards young people with greater prospects, because their economic input is significant and they serve as a role model for others.

In order to achieve a higher level of integration, it is necessary to establish a dialogue with young people themselves, with regard to their own responsibilities and choices. Local and regional authorities have a key role to play. They are able to function as "directors" to bring together the various stakeholders and stimulate discussions.

In the context of an ageing society, the increasing demand for care, and the increasing pressure on the healthcare sector, the AER believes it is important to present careers in elderly care in a more positive light in order to attract more young people into a career in the care sector.

3. Create suitable conditions for a modern life-course policy

Creating a climate that is conducive to a modern life-course policy is a major challenge that should be a priority on the agenda of the various government bodies. It is clear that the traditional 'school-work-retirement' pattern will take on more flexible forms as a result of demographic change. In a population characterised by ageing and dejuvenation, the pressure on formal and informal care will increase. In addition, the labour-force participation rate is increasing among women. This will require a new balance between work and formal/informal care, a more flexible labour market, and increased investment in necessary preconditions such as childcare facilities.

A flexible life-course policy will give people the opportunity temporarily to look after a person who needs care, or follow a course of study later in life. The AER believes that there should be a wide-ranging debate on modern life-course policy, so that the form, content and consequences can be more effectively identified. In addition, companies should make firmer commitments to implement the concept of Lifelong Learning.

In the field of informal care in particular, the AER would advise the European Commission to reinforce this aspect of the social infrastructure by means of specific European funding programmes. Also important in this context is the need to achieve a favourable balance between work and informal care.

4. The regions as bridge-builders...

The European regions can make an important contribution in terms of dealing with the challenges and problems of demographic change. By entering into a permanent dialogue with citizens, local authorities, the private sector, care providers and the welfare sector, it will be possible to bring these sectors closer together, enabling them to develop a shared vision and to build and exchange information and expertise. This is the formula on which the 'learning region' is based. The task of the regional governments is to motivate the key stakeholders and facilitate the development of a powerful policy designed to deal with the consequences of an ageing population.

5. Innovative strategies

The AER believes in the power of senior citizens. Again, we would recommend that, in the years to come, EU policy emphasise the positive aspects of age. People want to live independently for as long as possible. They have considerable social capital (e.g. social skills) that could be put to greater use in the community. However, the right conditions must be created in order to achieve this. There is a great deal of work to be done on this in the near future at local, regional, national and European level. It is still the case that too many senior citizens, and people with a disability, are excluded from participation in society. Many of these people have the capacity to participate actively in a job or in the local community. Society does not make sufficient use of their skills and knowledge.

In addition, the AER asks the European Commission to pay attention to the contribution that technological advances can make in terms of enabling people to lead an independent life for as long as possible. Domatics is still at an early stage of development, but the benefits are already evident.

6. Immigration

In dealing with the challenges of an ageing population, the AER asks the European Commission to positively address the question of immigration from non-EU countries. Immigration is likely to continue, and indeed increase, as the opportunities for employment and wealth creation within a thriving and sustainable EU prove attractive to communities outside the EU.

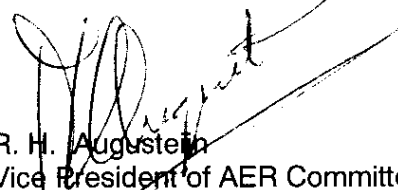
This will be a real test for solidarity and social cohesion for EU countries, and leadership from the EU will be vital. This approach would be consistent with the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy. Immigration will bring its own challenges, but would also offer skills and social capital which would otherwise not be available to the EU.

In conclusion

The AER is aware that, in the broad context of demographic change, the Member States and local/regional authorities have important responsibilities. Since there are differences between the regions, this is the level at which interregional interaction and innovation can be developed. The EU can stimulate and facilitate this process, based on the subsidiarity principle.

The AER looks forward to the next step in the process of formulating a widely supported EU policy for addressing demographic change in Europe. We hope that this response will provide valuable input for that process. Naturally the AER, representing the 250 member regions from 30 European countries, is committed to working with the European Commission to create a sustainable Europe.


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GREEN PAPER ON DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

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