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EURAG Statement on the European Commission's Green Paper on „Facing Demographic Change towards a new Solidarity of Generations”

Preliminary Remarks

EURAG appreciates that the European Union has taken on board the issue of demographic change by convening a Conference on Demography in last July and by publishing the Green Paper “Facing Demographic Change towards a new Solidarity of Generations”, thus recognizing that ageing in combination with birth rates under the replacement level makes a reorientation of EU-policies in the field of employment, social cohesion and equal opportunities necessary.

EURAG - European Federation of Older Persons - is a Federation of organisations of and for older persons; our expertise is the representation of interests of senior citizens in Europe. Statements and positions formulated reflect the voices of older persons.

EURAG stresses the need for:

- sufficient income security in order to prevent old-age poverty, in particular affecting women
- access to life-long learning
- provision of medical treatment and quality care without discrimination
- recognition of the importance of older people's participation in decision-making processes
- provisions for older people to contribute to society's cohesion by voluntary work – active citizenship !
- measures preventing any kind of discrimination on grounds of age.
- promotion of autonomous living in old-age

EURAG is, as can be seen from this enumeration of its goals, concerned with questions concerning people of all ages and not only topics limited to persons in retirement age.

Also the list of questions included in the Green Paper reflects the concept that ageing concerns all age groups; and we have been glad to state that also youth organisations feel concerned and are ready to answer the questions asked in the Commission paper.

In spite of the overall positive approach, in the text we have found also some sentences that show that the ageing of European societies is primarily seen as a problem, stressing that Europe will be confronted with additional burdens, especially financial burdens.

In the text there are very few indications that the Commission is taking due note of the huge amount of contributions to increase the welfare of European societies made by older persons themselves. In our opinion questions concerning the promotion, recognition, and support of voluntary activities of these, older, European citizens, are not sufficiently dealt with.

EURAG Answers:

“Do you take the view that the discussion of demographic trends and managing their impact should take place at European level?

If so, what should be the objectives, and which policy areas are concerned?”

In our view it is quite obvious that discussions and possible answers to questions related to demographic change cannot be carried out only at national level. Questions arising from this development concern all aspects of life and, consequently, have to be dealt with at all political levels, and, thus, also at the European level, encompassing all sectors.

In April 2002 the UN World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid concluded with the adoption of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) 2002. In Autumn 2002 the UNECE member countries, i.e. also all 25 present EU member countries, adopted the “Berlin Ministerial Declaration A Society for all Ages in the UNECE Region” as well as the “Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002”

This adoption proves that the Governments of member countries were, already when preparing this Ministerial Conference in Berlin, convinced that questions related to demographic change had to be dealt with not only at the national but also at the European level, and had defined clear objectives and policy fields concerned.

EURAG welcomed this common effort of UNECE Member States, i.e. also of all EU Member States already in 2002. In our opinion the texts then adopted are an important collection of carefully formulated objectives and commitments of member states as well as a good starting point for further deliberations, and we shall consequently come back to these texts in our answers to some of the questions asked in the Green Paper.

Without any doubts Europe is not isolated from the rest of the world and it is necessary to take into consideration that impact of demographic changes outside of Europe does seriously affect immigration and European labour market.

The circumstances, history, values and culture in the European countries are very different. It is impossible to talk about one “European level”. For example, the welfare-system in Canada and south-Australia are very much the same as the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, but very different from Portugal and Italy. Not to speak of the Eastern European countries!

So is the demographic situation. Countries with a colonial past and a liberal way of treating refugees have a completely different population compared with others. The

Netherlands: 2 million immigrants, among them 1 million Muslims, Denmark less than 80.000 thanks to a more strict policy to refugees and no colonial past.

“How can a better work/life balance help to tackle the problems associated with demographic ageing?”

The creation of framework conditions for the reconciliation of family and job obligations is one of the biggest challenges for today’s family and generation policies. Such framework conditions comprise family-friendly settings, in particular flexible working hours, the creation of qualitative childcare services as well as adequate social recognition of the contribution of families with children or those caring for older persons or other dependent family members.

Incentives for a balanced distribution of family and household obligations can be established through entitlements supporting the family, like for example the Austrian form of paternity leave or the childcare allowance distributed between mother and father.

In the afore mentioned UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy for the UN Plan of Action on Ageing it is requested to “improve care facilities and introduce arrangements which make it easier for all workers, women and men, to combine work and family responsibilities” (para 41) As well as: “An important element in this respect is ensuring equality between men and women throughout their lives particularly regarding the distribution of responsibilities in terms of work and income, care of dependent family members and social protection.” (Para 90).

We would like to stress one specific aspect: the growing number of very old persons will require a growing number of informal carers (family members, friends and neighbours). They have to be supported in their task by e.g. making community centres, day care and respite care centres widely available, further developing home care and home nursing services, but also by providing measures of real labour-market integration or re-integration, and social protection for care-givers who had to partly or completely interrupt their professional career during care-giving.

We know that the most numerous group threatened by unemployment are people over 35 years with low level of education. In the European Union they represent one fifth of the population. It is necessary to make responsible attitudes of individuals “pay off”. Support also employers who offer programmes of lifelong learning. And those who adapt working conditions so as to make them suitable for older employees.

Support for adult education from public budgets must be balanced and approached as equally important as supporting the development of children and young people. It benefits economy more when a person works and pays taxes instead of collecting social benefits. We must respect the reluctance of adults to return to the classroom, and therefore it is necessary to promote informal learning and dissemination of information.

“How can a more balanced distribution of household and family tasks between men and women be encouraged?”

Research shows that demographic change, the ageing of societies, is going in parallel with a profound change in family structures. The classical image of a family with a male breadwinner and a woman active in the household, caring for children and

dependent (old) family members, can no longer be found very often. Nevertheless, all studies show that women assume most of the family work. The UNECE Strategy in its para 31 demands: “The equal treatment of men and women in social protection systems should support a better reconciliation of work and family responsibilities throughout the life cycle. Special attention needs to be paid to the position of those family members who interrupt their employment to rear children and to care for family members and as a result suffer reduction in their pension entitlement, and those who devote themselves to household work and the care of children and other relatives.” This means that the key objective should be to create the measures for support of the informal (family) carers not to endanger his/her own financial security and professional career.

To avoid burn out and health risks of informal carers – men and women - , it is, further, recommended to facilitate periodical respite care services for care givers.

In a number of countries, for example, there are laws entitling employees to family care leave with reduced salaries or at least this period being taken into account for calculating pension rights. EURAG strongly recommends to implement such measures in all EU Member States.

“How can parents, in particular young parents, be encouraged to enter the labour market, have the career that they want, and the number of children they want?”

The obvious answer is regularly: wide availability of affordable, accessible and quality care services for children.

We would, however, like to stress another aspect, i.e. the role of grandparents: the care services assumed by persons beyond retirement age are proof of the active contribution of the older generations to the welfare of society as a whole: young parents are, frequently, only able to concentrate on their professional activities because they know that they can rely on their parents’ generation when it comes to look after their children. This is not a political programme, but simply a fact that shows that persons aged 55 plus are a resource for society.

However: in most European countries there has been an important migration within the country. In the Netherlands, e.g., it is an exception when the children live in the same village or town than their parents. So that it is a geographical impossibility that grandparents can take care of their grandchildren.

“To what extent can immigration mitigate certain negative effects of demographic ageing? What policies should be developed for better integrating these migrants, in particular young people?”

Immigration from outside the EU cannot be seen as the solution to the issue of population ageing. It is, however, undoubtedly one element to be taken into account when it comes to designing adequate strategies for economic growth and full employment.

However, if immigration of highly skilled labour is widely encouraged, it is likely that a significant proportion of these workers would migrate from countries that could ill afford to lose their contribution to the development process. Migration policies should

be based on a broad assessment of economic, social and regional interests. (see para 36, UNECE Strategy)

Immigration can be a possible solution when integration in society is adequately promoted takes. In the long run, social policies have to be adapted to the needs of immigrants (e.g. in the field of care – “culturally sensitive care”).

As an organisation representing the interests of older persons we would further like to point out the special needs of ageing migrants who arrived in earlier decades in EU member countries. Governments should strive to develop measures to assist older migrants in sustaining economic and health security. It is especially important to promote a positive image of their contribution to the host country and respect for their cultural differences.

“How can the organisation of work be modernised, to take into account the specific needs of each age group ?”

Young people who would like to have more time for their children as well as older workers would profit from a more flexible distribution of education - professional life – leisure time during the life course. More flexibility i.e. the possibility to change several times from full employment to part time employment plus family work, and to educational/training periods, would be highly desirable; this, however, requires a change in the systems of provision of social security, including pension credits.

But the option of working less in younger years should go hand in hand with removing barriers and disincentives to work longer; this might also include measures to encourage older persons’ re-integration into the labour force, promoting better training of older workers and taking measures against age discrimination, as well as reviewing financial and other disincentives to the participation of retired persons in part-time or temporary employment.

Managers and all those responsible for the organisation of work should be aware of the fact that today’s organisation of work is adapted to the capacities of persons aged 30 to 40 – the special needs and the different forms of capacities of younger and older persons are not adequately taken into account (this statement is based on studies carried out in Finland) .

Generally, EURAG is in favour of flexible retirement programmes.

One possible approach might be the way as it was done in the Netherlands, where hundreds of thousands, men and women, have a part-time job. In many families the man works 80%, the woman 60%. The big advantage is, that the man takes a bigger part of the education. Disadvantage: job promotion for a part-timer is difficult. Another disadvantage is the lower pension because of the part-time work.

“How can activities employing elderly people in the voluntary sector and the social economy be developed?”

In fact older persons are more engaged in voluntary activities in associations and organisations than any other population group. It seems, however, that this is not yet adequately recognized. There are only very few countries where pertinent statistical

data are available. Thus, a better evaluation of this contribution of older persons to the welfare of the general population would be desirable.

On the other hand the job-generating function of the voluntary sector and social economy should not only be recognized but also enhanced and organisations active in this field be financially supported.

A very efficient means of encouraging voluntary activities of older persons are European exchange programmes of older volunteers. EURAG has been carrying out such programmes for several years and we have seen that the results i.e. the activation and commitment of older persons to this form of activity, have been excellent. Such projects are very rewarding not only for the older volunteers, but also for the organisations, social services, and public authorities involved.

The attention devoted to voluntary work at national levels is still insufficient. In a number of countries, mainly in the new EU Member States, the necessary legislative framework is missing. This limits the mobility of volunteers throughout Europe. We also miss legislation for the certification of retraining (new qualification) acquired through voluntary work.

It has further to be stated that voluntary work is only possible when you have a regular income; poorer people need all their time to gain money.

“What should be the response to pensioner mobility between Member States, in particular with regard to social protection and health care?”

A first step urgently needed is a better, very comprehensive information concerning the rights in the field of social protection and health care of all older persons who envisage to move from one Member State to another.

Social protection rights and equal access to health care in all EU Member States must be guaranteed. For example, a British citizen who decides to live in Spain in retirement, must not have any disadvantages with regard to health-care, pension entitlements, care etc.

“How should we be investing in health promotion and prevention so that the people of Europe continue to benefit from longer healthy life expectancy?”

General awareness should be raised regarding the fact that preventive measures are much cheaper than reparative medicine. Public money spent on maintaining health is still only a very small percentage of the money spent on medical and social care. In view of the increasing numbers of older persons a shifting of public expenses to support more health promoting measures will be urgently needed. Health promoting activities and awareness campaigns must be intensified.

An excellent example for good practices is EURAG's Memory Training Centre in Prague that developed a unique training programme for memory trainers for the elderly. Memory training is a very effective tool against mental decline and results in increased self-confidence and self-esteem and improved quality of life and is very inexpensive. Cognitive training in combination with physical exercising contributes to successful ageing and maintenance of independence .

“How do we arrive at a balanced distribution of care for the very old between families, social services and institutions? What can be done to help families ? What can be done to support local care networks?”

First of all: such a balanced distribution might be encouraged by policy measures, but the most important aspect is that older persons are enabled to decide for themselves how they would like to live – whether this leads to a balanced distribution of care or not.

It is, however, paramount to plan support measures for informal carers, i.e. relatives, neighbours or friends: creating day care centres, improving working conditions for home carers and home nurses, offering respite care services, alarm systems, and, guaranteeing the social protection including pensions rights for the informal carers. It must also be born in mind that the vast majority of informal carers are, themselves, already approaching or even beyond retirement age – which increases the risk of burn out of this group.

Of great importance is the development of community programmes, involving professionals and older people themselves in their creation – programmes which obliterate the difference between a “healthy” and a “disabled” person. Communities are well able to substitute for some functions of poorly-functioning, fragile or abusive families. The EU should use its grant policy to support the development of community programmes and their extension.

Enhance the system itself – a paradigm shift in caring

Introduce universal social rights covering a wide range of care related areas

Tax, or insurance funded care systems on the national levels are typically universalistic, i.e. include all residents in a country, and use the criteria “care need” for the allocation of benefits. Further criteria, which are used, are the income of the elderly and the family members and the living arrangements or family situation. Typically, income is taken into account by a means-testing procedure, i.e. only persons below a certain income threshold receive services. Research shows that services oriented only towards the lower socio-economic classes may be very poor. The orientation towards the living situation and the family status may burden the families with a responsibility they are not able or not ready to take on and leave the care dependent elderly in a situation of dependency.

The introduction of universal social rights on a European level would be a guiding principle for the national governments to introduce an equal distribution of care services for all persons in need of care.

Efforts to Eliminate the Medicalization of Care

Care dependent elderly have most contacts with medical and paramedical carers. Yet, care dependency is not only a medical problem. Medical professions focus on the physical treatment and physical care at the expense of a holistic view of humans, in which also psychological, social, existential and spiritual (also in a non religious sense) dimensions of humankind should be acknowledged. Another aspect of one-sidedness is the fact that the carers exclusively focus on the curative dimension of care, and neglect the preventive and salutogenic dimensions.

It is necessary that the psychosocial dimension of care is integrated in basic quality standards.

Communication and networking between regional authorities and cities concerning care services need to be encouraged as well.

Improve the procedure of the assessments of needs

Assessments have to ensure fairness of distribution of resources, and they must be transparent to users as well as additional assessors who might be involved to get a second opinion. Assessments which are done in close contact between the care dependent elderly/informal carers and a care manager are most efficient.

Public Responsibility to monitor informal care

Particularly in family based systems (e.g. Austria, Germany, Italy) where the majority of home based care is exclusively provided by informal carers, it is necessary that the public authorities observe their responsibility to monitor informal care. It is irresponsible for the welfare state to burden families with the care of their elders and not offer relief and supervision. If care standards are a valid criterion, they may not just be applied to professional care, but also to informal care. Of course, this touches a taboo area, because it seems to be consensus that the state ought not to interfere in families. However, in the interest of vulnerable individuals this seems to be legitimate. Further, societal awareness must be created to prevent abuse of older care dependent persons.

Support of Informal Carers (family, neighbours, friends)

There are several services and/or institutions that could facilitate the informal carers' lives and support their care work. Temporary relief, which is necessary for the carers to get some rest and regain strength, could be provided through day centres, sitting services, and a right to paid respite care. Informal carers also need more social security.

EURAG suggests concrete measures, e.g.: An insurance covering accidents that may happen when care tasks are performed (cf. statutory accident insurance for employees), and a general adaptation of their working-time arrangements (e.g. flexible hours, temporary reduction to part-time,...).

Home adaptations

Many efforts are undertaken to promote free movement *within* the care dependent's home. Efforts to make it easier for them to leave their homes are often neglected. Here programs should be developed to adapt the surroundings to their needs, e.g. by ramps, hand rails, stair lifts.

Regarding the training of care personnel, a European minimum level of training for care workers would facilitate comparability and free movement of care workers within the EU. During the training, emphasis should be placed on soft skills.

Bad working conditions of care workers in the private as well as the public sector need to be combated, e.g. by providing supervision, coaching, and support in conflicts with clients and/or their families.

“How can new technologies support older people ?”

Technical aids, from automotive wheelchairs to the “smart home”, from alarm systems to reading devices for blind people, have been available for quite some time already, but they are, not used in all cases where they may be useful.

As an organisation representing older persons and consequently potential users, we are very much in favour of user involvement in all steps of designing and development of innovative technical aids. Users are the best experts when deciding about and evaluating the usability of new devices.

We got very strong confirmation for this approach in the framework of EURAG's participation in the FP5 research project *"FRR Friendly Rest Room"*. Numerous users involved in the development of these "intelligent" rest rooms for older persons with restricted mobility and persons with a disability did, actually, judge the results, i.e. the prototypes, very favourably. They confirmed that the quality of life of those concerned can, thus, be significantly improved.

EURAG propagates to ensure that disabled and elderly citizens in EUROPE get equal access to Information-Communication-Technology (ICT) products and therefore enjoy the social and economic freedom that these products and services gives everyone.") For example, Internet shopping can be found of great value when being housebound.

In research – and in particular in the age-related health research, simple technical solutions and training possibilities must be promoted which improve the autonomy and the self-determination and thus the quality of life of older people. This should not only be provided in the ICT sector and older people's direct access to that, but above all the access to the use of technologies in general.

In order to help implementing developed prototypes, dissemination of technologies must be promoted. Assistive technologies must be supported with public funds. Special subsidies for successfully tested prototypes will finally lead that prices will decrease so that more people will have access to such products.

"Should the European Union be promoting exchanges and regular (e.g. annual) analysis of demographic change and its impact on societies and all the policies concerned?"

Yes – but we doubt that these analyses have to be carried out on an annual basis; we feel this to be a rather short interval.

"Should the Union's financial instruments – particularly the structural funds – take better account of these changes? If so, how?"

Although very well understanding the constrictions caused by the stability pact, EURAG is of the opinion that reducing expenses in the field of social expenses is counterproductive. An increase in social spending in the Member States would automatically lead to the creation of more jobs in the social sector and in the health sector – and the creation of more jobs is a key objective of the Lisbon goals. As an organisation representing the interests of older generations in Europe we demand that decision makers recognize this fact and act accordingly.

"How can European social dialogue contribute to the better management of demographic change? What role can civil society and civil dialogue with young people play?"

One of our key demands is to listen to those concerned, i.e. to strengthen civil dialogue with older and younger generations. Instruments and opportunities for a structured social dialogue must be created and criteria must be formulated to hear those concerned, i.e. also older persons themselves, and not only experts and organisations' staff members. Self-determination and participation in decision making of older persons must be a decisive part of this process.

We further ask for establishing patients' or residents' councils in nursing homes and residential homes for older persons. These councils might include relatives, but definitely should give the residents themselves a strong voice which must be involved in consultation and decision-making processes.

Municipality should establish senior citizens' councils which are involved in decision making processes concerning older people .

Apart from such senior citizens' councils, EURAG is strongly in favour of joint approaches and initiatives that focus on inter-generational collaboration. Such actions are most suitable to prevent generation segregation – and thus highly valuable contributions to social cohesion.

“How can demographic change be made an integral part of all the Union's internal and external policies”

An evaluation of all effects of political measures to all groups of the population including the older generations would be desirable. The aspect of demographic ageing further should be taken into account in all policy areas. In other words: we would like to see mainstreaming ageing, as well as impact assessment .

Despite all the positive aspects pointed out above, EURAG also has to express its concern at the seriousness of the situation we are facing, not only financially but particularly in the provision of carers. Our older population is rapidly increasing at the same time as our working population is correspondingly diminishing.

A declining birth rate coupled with a longer life span will inevitably result in an increasing proportion of the older population, particularly women being without family support in retirement.

Demographic development will lead to future financial constraints which will undoubtedly affect day care and medical services.

The priorities given to these various services available can, however, be changed and we would suggest that medical services enabling older people to continue to lead independent and useful lives is a priority.

EURAG – representing the interests of older people in Europe – is committed to constructively contribute to meeting the challenges and to shaping future generation policies in Europe.

EURAG (European Federation of Older Persons) was founded in 1962 and is the largest European NGO of senior citizens organizations and represents through its 132 Member Organizations in 31 European countries the interests of millions of older people in Europe. EURAG is a Member Organization of the Platform of European Social NGOs (www.socialplatform.org) in Brussels and has Participatory Status with the Council of Europe as well as consultative Status with the UN.