



CEMR Response to the Green Paper 'Confronting Demographic changes: A new solidarity between generations" (COM(2005)94 final of 15.3.2005)

SUMMARY

On 16th March 2005, the European Commission adopted the Green Paper entitled 'Confronting demographic changes: a new solidarity between generations', which looks at the management of demographic changes in the Member States and the role that the European Union can play in that process.

The Council of Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) welcomes the opportunity provided by this Green Paper to convey its views on the role that local and regional authorities can respectively play in addressing the challenges and opportunities created by the ageing of European populations.

CEMR represents some 100,000 local and regional authorities, federated through 46 national associations in 34 European countries. We believe that local and regional governments have a key contribution to make in the management of demographic changes, through the delivery of essential public services responsive to the needs and aspirations of both younger and older citizens in Europe.

However, we consider that local and regional involvement in the debate launched at European level on age-related issues is so far not adequately ensured. We therefore call on the European Commission to acknowledge more fully the local dimension of demographic ageing and to closely associate our representatives to the initiatives that will be taken in the follow-up of the Green Paper.

Introductory comments

1. The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) welcomes the European Commission's Green Paper, which looks at issues that are becoming a central priority for many local and regional governments in Europe, as the demographic changes are directly affecting the planning and delivery of a wide range of public services provided at local and regional level.

2. CEMR agrees with the view that the current demographic trends require an integrated approach, mobilising and coordinating a range of relevant policies and a variety of stakeholders at different levels.

3. At the same time, we consider that the ageing of population poses challenges that cannot be addressed by 'one-size fits all' solutions. Indeed, it is a phenomenon whose impact varies greatly from one Member State to another and within these, depending on the initial structure of the population, the pace of the changes and the economic and social conditions prevailing at national and sub-national level.

4. Hence we welcome the recognition by the European Commission that 'many issues associated with demographic change come within the exclusive competence of the Member States or their

regional authorities". CEMR however regrets that the Commission does not equally acknowledge the role that municipalities also can and do play in the management of demographic changes in Europe.

5. We were similarly very concerned that local and regional governments were not represented at the European Conference, which was organised on 11-12th July in Brussels to exchange experience on the issues raised in the Green Paper.

6. CEMR represents some 100,000 local and regional authorities, federated through 47 national associations of local government across 34 European countries. We consider that local and regional authorities as providers of essential public services in the areas of education and training, childcare, health and elderly care, local public transport and housing are ideally placed to develop tailor-made solutions to specific problems related to demographic ageing.

7. We therefore urge the European Commission to recognise more fully the role that municipalities and regions can play in managing demographic challenges and to involve closely our representatives in the initiatives that will be proposed in the follow-up of the Green Paper.

8. CEMR will address the regional and local perspectives of ageing issues at its next European Congress, which will be held in Innsbruck on 10-12th May 2006. We intend to pursue our work in this field and to further contribute to the debate initiated at European level on the management of demographic changes.

9. Our aim is to ensure that the nature of demographic ageing at regional and municipal level is fully understood and that effective policy responses are developed at the adequate levels, with the involvement of all relevant actors.

I. The European Union's role in managing demographic changes

What should be the role of the EU in managing demographic developments? How could European policies and financial instruments better take on board demographic changes?

The member associations of CEMR take the view that the causes and consequences of demographic changes are largely local in character and that solutions should therefore be primarily sought at sub-national level, in cooperation with central governments.

In many EU countries, local and regional authorities are already developing strategies to prepare for the consequences of the ageing of populations. Our belief is that the EU should support such initiatives by providing a framework for the exchange of experiences as well as through the production of regular analyses enabling a better understanding of the demographic trends and their implications on relevant policy areas.

In this relation, we consider that existing EU financial instruments such as the Research and Development Framework Programme could be used to support a greater number of innovative research focusing on ageing issues. For this purpose, it would be desirable to define within the Seventh Research Framework Programme a separate thematic priority on demographic changes under the "cooperation programme", with a specific substantial earmarked budget. Such a priority could focus on issues such as improving health care provisions and research into technologies and methods for fostering independent living, with the aim of ensuring that the benefits drawn from innovative practice in one part of the EU are shared and built upon in other regions and municipalities.

The Commission should moreover encourage the production of detailed statistical information, with a view to help local and regional authorities to plan more accurately public services provided to an ageing population.

At the same time, we would welcome increased support through the European Social Fund (ESF) for the development of innovative projects and networks of cooperation allowing the benchmarking of best practices on issues such as: the training of specialised workforce in the health care sector, making education more relevant to working life, developing new services to the elderly and integrating third-country migrants at local level.

The Structural Funds could in turn be more broadly used to support local public investments in infrastructures responding to age-specific needs in the housing, childcare and health/elderly care sectors, particularly in areas where the sustainability of social services provision is being challenged by population changes. In parallel to this, the European cohesion policy should resolutely pursue its action towards bridging the gaps between urban and rural areas and ensuring equal living and working conditions across the EU.

On the policy field, we consider that action at European level should focus on ensuring the full implementation of the objectives set out in the Lisbon Agenda and Social Inclusion Strategy, in particular as regards increasing the employment rates of women and young people, fighting gender inequality and other forms of discrimination, promoting higher quality of initial education and training, reforming social protection systems and ensuring full access to affordable and high quality social services to all.

II. The challenges of European demography

How can a better work/life balance help to tackle the problems associated with demographic ageing? How can the availability of child care structures and elderly care structures be improved by the public and private sectors?

Measures that allow a good reconciliation of work and family life play an important role in addressing demographic challenges insofar as they make it easier for both men and women to enter in employment, while at the same time caring for children and other dependents.

Local and regional authorities as major public employers, moreover employing a high proportion of women, already strive to offer possibilities for flexible work patterns, part-time work, parental leave and other measures that help to strike a balance between work and family life. They are also providers of care services for children and other dependents, which form an integral part of policies designed at facilitating women's participation to labour markets.

CEMR would however like to emphasise that the delivery of family friendly policies needs to be backed by adequate tax and benefit systems, as these also directly impact on family formation and child rearing.

We moreover wish to stress that local and regional authorities are acting against the background of an eroding tax base and an ageing workforce, while higher revenues are needed to finance services to caring families. If we are to further stimulate the offer for services like childcare, all-day schooling and elderly care, it will therefore be essential that municipalities and regions are provided with the financial resources necessary for the maintenance and further expansion of the existing social infrastructure.

We otherwise call on the European Commission to guarantee equal administrative treatment between public and private care providers and to ensure that any future measure proposed at European level to stimulate more specifically the supply of social services of general interest will respect this principle.

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? How could Community instruments, in particular the legislative framework to combat discrimination, the structural funds and the Employment Strategy, contribute?

CEMR member associations share the view that, while immigration from outside the EU will help to mitigate the effects of the demographic decline, it will not suffice on its own to meet the demographic challenges currently experienced in most of the Member States.

In any case, the option of a wider recourse to immigration as part of the response to demographic ageing should be addressed at national level, taking into account the needs for additional workforce in specific sectors. We similarly believe that the adoption of specific measures to attract certain categories of workers, as well as the subsequent grant of residence and work permits to third-country nationals should remain within the remit of national governments.

At European level, a number of provisions are already in place, which ensure amongst other equal treatment in employment and the coordination of national measures for the admission of certain categories of third-country migrants. CEMR considers that further legislative action is not needed. Rather, financial instruments such as the European Social Fund and the prospective EU Integration Fund should be more extensively used to promote the building of networks of cooperation and the spread of viable practices in the field of integrating migrants locally. Action in this direction could focus on issues such as: the validation of skills, access to housing and to appropriate employment and the role that youth services as well as voluntary and community activities can play in involving migrants into local life.

III. A new solidarity between generations

How can the organisation of work be modernised, to take into account the specific needs of each age group? How can young couples' integration in working life be facilitated and how can we help them to find a balance between flexibility and security to bring up their children, to train and update their skills to meet the demands of the labour market? How can we enable older people to work more?

CEMR considers that, in addition to measures helping to reconcile work and family life, the availability and quality of flexible training opportunities enabling to alternate education, work and work-linked training should be improved, as these equally play a great role in assisting women, young people and older workers to remain in employment while adjusting their skills to the labour market demands.

At the same time, solutions should be planned to accommodate the specific needs of older workers wishing to remain longer in employment. Local and regional authorities in many EU countries are currently stepping-up the introduction of such active ageing measures, through more flexible working arrangements and adapted health and safety conditions at work. In addition to this, 'active mentorship' practices are also developed, which provide new employment opportunities for young people while downscaling older workers' of their employment.

However, we wish to emphasise that, in order to avoid shifting the financial burden of training and active ageing measures on employers, these should be coupled with adequate financial incentives and reformed pensions systems, which allow gradual moves from employment to retirement and accommodate employment patterns linked to individual needs for health care and/or for work/private life reconciliation.

We moreover see the need to encourage a broad range of public initiatives supporting re-skilling, self-employment and entrepreneurship amongst older workers. These should be complemented by

wide campaigns promoting positive employers' attitudes towards older workers, in support of the proper implementation of the European Employment Directive, which prohibits direct and indirect age discrimination in employment and training.

IV. Solidarity with the very elderly

How do we arrive at a balanced distribution of care for the very old between families, social services and institutions? How do we train the human resources needed and provide them with good quality jobs in a sector, which is often characterised by low salaries and low qualifications? What can be done to support local care networks?

The growing number of very elderly people aged over 80 years will require a higher supply of specialised services ranging from housekeeping and related services for people who can no longer live autonomously, to outpatient nursing services and in-patient care in clinics and specialised institutions. Increasing the offer for such services will in turn call for a higher number of qualified employees in the nursing and elderly care sectors. We believe that employment in these sectors could be made more attractive by means of improved training and working conditions in the workplace, combined with corresponding better career and income opportunities.

At local level, the set of measures that will need to be deployed to assist an increasing number of senior citizens will firstly entail reinforcing programmes promoting physical and mental health of independent elderly persons, as part of preventive health care measures. Municipalities will also need to develop informal care services involving semi-professional helpers and volunteers in order to meet the domestic needs of those who do not qualify for long-term institutional care. In addition to these, the provision of services for out-patient care will have to be stimulated, in order to maintain the sustainability of in-patient care services delivered in clinics and specialised institutions.

CEMR takes the view that policy measures aimed at increasing the supply of elderly care services should in any case be managed without cuts in publicly funded care services of general interest, whose provision falls within the remit of local and regional authorities. Accordingly, we call on the European Commission to put the focus of the open method of coordination at European level in the field of health and long-term care on ensuring the full access, high quality and financial sustainability of health and elderly care services.

CEMR would finally wish to point out that the growing number of seniors will also require adjustments in the built environment, including in the public utilities and facilities sector, which will need to be adapted to the physical requirements of older age. It is worth recalling that such measures are essential to fight social exclusion, by maintaining a broad range of services in the health, public transport, education and leisure activities sectors accessible to older people, whose mobility is often lost or severely reduced. The same consideration calls for improvements in the private housing and retirement housing sectors. In order to guide the action of public authorities in this field, CEMR would welcome the undertaking of specific research by the European Commission on possible alternative transportation choices for the ageing population in urban, suburban and rural areas, as well as on the impact of ageing on housing policies. CEMR is willing to cooperate to such a research, by bringing its experience built on the practices of its member associations.