

Demographic Change as an Opportunity

parliamentary group decision

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- Summary -

Demographic change is a reality, yet alarmism and scaremongering still shape the public debate on this subject. We must face up to reality: our population is going to shrink, the proportion of older people will greatly increase and the population structure will change completely. Only by recognising these trends can we also recognise and seize the opportunities involved.

Like all change, demographic trends offer opportunities. They increase the pressure to take action, particularly in the development of a knowledge society or the modernisation of social security systems. We want to use this pressure to press ahead with sensible reforms. The foreseeable shortage of skilled workers can be alleviated if we finally make optimal use of potential in the education sector and finally implement insights reached long ago in the fields of infant education and individual support. Society, the economy and the state cannot afford any further waste of education resources. In other fields, such as policy in rural areas, demographic trends are forcing a rethink on issues relating to regional cooperation, new concepts for public services and the provision of infrastructure. The idea that growth must be defined as an increase in the number of inhabitants or in land consumption is outdated. Media literacy and mobile facilities offer opportunities which will enable us to continue to ensure participation and care in future.

We need guidelines and aims to help us shape the transformations that demographic change will cause. In our view, the aim must be a caring and solidarity-based society in which all people can live their lives as they see fit – irrespective of where in Germany they live or how old they are. Future generations' opportunities depend on us not living beyond our means today. Thus a policy which seeks to ensure inter-generational equity must split costs as fairly as possible between generations and income groups. To achieve these aims, we need to depart from tradition ways of thinking in some areas. Regarding demographic equity, we need a debate within society about which tasks the state should take on in future, what role should be played by civil society, how we can safeguard public services and whether we can preserve the aim of equal living conditions in Germany's regions.

We view the demographic challenge as a cross-sectoral task. Initial courses of action are visible in the following policy fields.

A new life-course policy

Demographic change means that changes to the way we deal with life courses are unavoidable. Our personal lifetimes are growing longer and the traditional working life pattern will no longer exist in the same form. We need a modern working-time policy; in our view, this means creating opportunities which help to reduce the pressure on what is known as "the rush hour of life". This term refers to the particularly intensive stage of life between the ages of 25 and 35, when, in addition to training, studying and starting a family, people enter working life. We need a rethink regarding the distribution of labour among all the generations, regarding both young people's opportunities for training and older people's participation in the labour market. We need a flexible working-time policy, working-time accounts, time for continuing education and career changes, civic engagement and family work. A new life-course policy creates more freedom and flexibility for every individual and is an important key to shaping demographic change.

Supporting children and families

Our focus is on children's wellbeing – irrespective of where they live. Children need more rights. It is the state's task to work together with families to ensure that all children receive optimal development opportunities. We want to enable more men and women to fulfil their desire to have children. To do so, we need a pluralistic image of families that recognises and supports the broad spectrum of lifestyles. A sustainable family policy can only be implemented via a combination of family-friendly care infrastructure, financial transfers and a modern working-time policy. Our aim is to enable both women and men to balance work and family life. The prerequisite for this is real gender equality. Despite the changing lifestyles of most families, our society has for too long clung to a welfare-state model focused primarily on men as the sole breadwinners. The "breadwinner model" permeates our social security and tax system and is in urgent need of change.

Participation in the knowledge society

In view of demographic change, reform of the education system is becoming even more urgent. Society, businesses and the state cannot afford any further waste of education resources. We must make greater use of the education potential of women, people with an immigrant background and elderly people, and integrate potentially vulnerable groups, such as school-leavers without qualifications. Optimal starting conditions are a crucial factor for subsequent educational success. We must therefore focus more on infant education. At the same time, the principle of lifelong learning must be anchored more strongly. The guiding principle and aim of education policy is no longer a one-off period of education, but rather the creation of optimal conditions for recurring learning periods through a reformed school, higher education and initial vocational training system. In higher education, we need more students and graduates. The creation of a knowledge society in which everyone can participate – regardless of age, gender and (social) background – is vital in coping with and shaping demographic change.

The labour market – participation instead of exclusion

In our society, gainful employment is an important factor for individual self-fulfilment and social integration. Enabling as many members of society as possible to participate in gainful employment is thus a key project, and not only in order to tackle demographic challenges. The labour market is deeply divided. We must therefore pursue various coordinated strategies to counter this trend. Ensuring that training and qualifications can be accessed by all is part of this. We must expand and modernise Germany's dual system of classroom and on-the-job training and improve the transition from school to work. This also includes maintaining the employability of older people, dismantling incentives to leave working life early and establishing new paths in continuing professional development and lifelong learning.

Integration: a challenge for the future

We need an integration policy which ensures that migrants become a fully accepted part of our society and which views immigrants as future citizens from the very beginning. This is therefore a cross-sectoral task affecting all policy fields, from the labour market and policy on the elderly to education policy. The proportion of people with a migrant background will increase as a share of the total population. Cultural and religious diversity will, from generation to generation, characterise life in our ageing society more strongly. There is a need for intercultural opening at local level, in social services, associations and politics. We see an urgent need for action on a right-to-stay regulation for people who have lived here for many years. At the moment, they are not granted permanent resident status and are thus denied the possibility of full integration. In future, we need an immigration policy which helps to ensure, via an innovative points system, that people come here, live here and work here.

A fulfilling old age

An increasing number of people can and want to lead an active life until an advanced age. We must look much more closely at all areas of elderly people's lives. It is high time for elderly people's potential to be discussed. They will become a more important target group across a broad range of policy areas: from new forms of accommodation and reform of long-term care to consumer protection. A culturally sensitive policy on the elderly will play a greater role. We need to establish conditions in which old age, in all its diversity, is fulfilling. Even in old age, people must be able to lead their lives as they see fit and participate in culture and society.

Intergenerational coexistence

The genuinely new aspect of our society's demographic trends is not that people are growing older, but that the generational structure is changing completely. In future, more elderly people will be living side-by-side with fewer younger people. That means we must rethink the way in which old and young people cooperate, too. Many areas are affected: participation in societal, social and cultural life, the future of our social security systems and the preservation of natural resources. This is a challenge for society as a whole, because all generations' future opportunities and chances of participation are at issue. Policy-makers cannot enforce positive intergenerational relations, but they can foster joint spheres of life for young and old people and thus have a positive influence on their coexistence.

Ensuring social security systems can cope with demographic trends

Social security systems must be shaped and further developed in a way that enables them to withstand demographic changes in the long term and that gives people security, whether as regards subsistence (including in old age) or health. The introduction of the sustainability factor in pensions insurance ensures that too great a burden is not placed on those paying contributions. We are in favour of raising the retirement age, although the labour-market situation for older workers must be improved.

Regarding health policy, the Greens' proposal of citizens' insurance combines the basic principles of solidarity and intergenerational equity by taking into account all forms of income in calculating contributions. Moreover, we want to enshrine disease prevention and health promotion for all as a pillar of the health system in its own right. A reform of long-term care insurance is urgently needed. In this context, we need a sustainable, fair and better solution: a form of citizens' insurance for long-term care with reserves to help cover costs arising from demographic trends. This would make it possible to limit contribution increases in future.

Local politics – strengthening local authorities and rural areas

Local authorities, as vital providers of public services and venues for civic engagement, need our special support, since the effects of our shrinking and ageing population are felt here more directly and are already having an impact on many areas of life. In order to begin to adapt, we need a paradigm change: a move away from the principle of growth in the sense of more inhabitants, more infrastructure and greater land consumption, towards a quality-based approach. The major challenge for policy-makers is to adapt land consumption and infrastructure to demographic trends in sufficient time. Demographic change also offers major opportunities, particularly with regard to limiting land consumption. We must recognise that the shrinking of the population will cost local authorities money. New cooperative network-like structures are essential. They can help to re-organise infrastructure, business locations and other tasks and distribute them effectively across regions. Local policy-makers have the task of combining a sustainable urban development policy and social policy, because the rich and poor, the mobile and immobile, are increasingly living apart.

Rural areas are affected particularly strongly by the ageing population, as well as by the exodus of young, well-educated people, in particular. New concepts are therefore needed here for the provision of public services and infrastructure, as well as greater efforts to foster civic engagement. The issue is to maintain a flourishing cultural life and creativity even under changed conditions – and here, like everywhere else, we need an active civil society, a dialogue with citizens and civic participation in order to shape social change.