The Committee calls on the Commission to create a specific budget heading for women’s civil society organisations in ACP countries.

7.9 More generally, it is important to create fast-track channels for women’s groups, both with regard to the eligibility of non-state actors and for access to funds.

7.10 Training courses aimed at promoting the activities of women’s groups that operate at grass roots level could, in the context of the Cotonou Agreement, prove to be a useful tool in implementing that agreement.

7.11 The Committee undertakes to promote the organisation of seminars to identify and look in depth at themes relating to the status and participation of women in ACP countries.

7.12 The Committee will call for equal participation of women’s delegations in those seminars and will promote meetings with women and associations from ACP countries and with third countries in general.

7.13 The Committee undertakes to hold, by the first half of 2005, a conference with the above-mentioned players. The objectives of this would be to promote the role of women in decision-making processes, to identify obstacles, and to define strategies based on the outlook of development process actors themselves.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the topic: ‘Towards the seventh Framework Programme for Research: Research needs in the area of demographic change — quality of life of elderly persons and technological requirements’

(2005/C 74/09)

On 29 January 2004, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the topic: ‘Towards the seventh Framework Programme for Research: Research needs in the area of demographic change — quality of life of elderly persons and technological requirements’.

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 14 July 2004. The rapporteur was Ms Heinisch.

At its 411th plenary session of 15 and 16 September 2004 (meeting of 15 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 144 votes to one, with two abstentions:

1. Summary

1.1 In the light of demographic change and the opportunities and risks involved for the quality of life of the growing numbers of older people in Europe, the Committee calls for:

(a) the inclusion of a key action in this field in the seventh Framework Programme for Research and

(b) flanking measures to establish a sound basis for timely policy planning, decision-making and action at both European and national level.

There are close links between the biological, psychological, social, cultural, technological, economic and structural aspects of ageing. Also, people always age within a specific physical and social environment. In Europe, this environment varies widely in geographical, cultural and socio-structural terms. Neither fact — the fact that the ageing process has many different dimensions and the fact that it takes place under a variety of conditions — is adequately reflected in current research programmes. However, given the changes in the population age structure, only such broad and long-term research can provide the sound basis for planning and decision-making needed in the many different areas of society involved and at all tiers of decision-making.
With regard to point (a), research is needed in particular in the following fields:

— economic and financial policy (4.1)
— work and employment (4.2)
— elderly people’s everyday lives (4.3)
— the social and spatial environment (4.4)
— lifelong learning (4.5)
— maintaining a healthy life and care requirements (4.6)
— new technologies (4.7)
— processing, collating and adding to existing knowledge (4.8).

The fact that the ageing process has many different dimensions and involves different cultural, economic and structural disciplines necessitates long-term multi- and interdisciplinary research.

With regard to point (b), the following flanking measures are in particular deemed necessary to ensure compliance with Article 85 of the Fundamental Rights Charter, which guarantees all older EU citizens the right to live in dignity and to participate actively as citizens and in decision-making processes:

— the application of the open method of coordination to adopt a uniform approach to – and classification of – indicators of older people’s quality of life in European countries: to facilitate exchanges of experiences, inter-European comparisons and mutual learning; to promote dialogue between representatives of organised civil society and the appropriate European Commission directorates-general; and to agree on common values in relation to the ageing society;
— the establishment of a joint European observatory to build a European Agency on Ageing and database to generate, concentrate and disseminate knowledge to improve the open method of coordination and draw practical policy conclusions;
— the establishment of an ‘Ageing Society’ category in the EESC; and
— workshops and conferences to boost knowledge about demographic change; highlight the urgent need for preventive and flanking measures; sharpen awareness; spread information about research findings as widely as possible; and foster exchanges between the old and the new Member States.

Purpose:

To establish a comprehensive knowledge base:

— for policies to maintain and, if necessary, increase the quality of life for present and future generations of older people; and
— to boost Europe’s economic development and competitiveness, given the potential offered by demographic change.

2. Introduction

2.1 Demographic change is one of the key historical successes of our time. It is also an ongoing challenge. Never before have entire generations been in the position where they can legitimately hope and expect to live out many years of old age. This new phase of life offers a wide range of opportunities, but also involves completely new tasks for individuals and society. In most European countries, many older people enjoy an adequate income and have the requisite physical and cognitive skills to live out their extra years in contented independence. This opens up new opportunities for economic and social development. As they grow older, however, people’s physical, sensory and cognitive faculties are also liable to decline and they risk becoming functionally restricted. Moreover, some groups in society do not have the requisite material, social and personal resources to be able to grow old with dignity. This applies in particular to many older women living alone. The different European countries also vary widely in this regard. Moreover, the shift in the age structure in all countries necessitates a redistribution of existing resources and adjustments to health and social security systems. Population ageing affects every EU country, albeit at rather differing speeds. As the EESC president wrote in his report on the European Economic and Social Committee’s activities in the period 2000-2002 (page 37):

2.2 ‘The Committee also drew attention to worrying demographic forecasts with particular impact in the fields of jobs, public health and pensions’.

2.3 Taking this development as its starting point, the present own-initiative opinion on research needs in the area of demographic change – quality of life of elderly persons and technological requirements calls for the inclusion of a key action in this field in the seventh Framework Programme for Research. This involves two separate, but closely related aspects: (i) demographic change as such, which is the result of the declining birth rate and the concomitant changes in family structures on the one hand, and rising life expectancy on the other; and (ii) ageing and old age as an autonomous phase of life with a high potential for social, cultural, organisational, technological and economic innovation, but which also brings with it certain risks. Research is required in both these fields, not only at macro level into their impact on society as a whole and the requisite political action, but at micro level as well, in other words their implications in terms of safeguarding older people’s quality of life and the action needed on that front. Account must, however, always be taken of the different circumstances of men and women.
3. Background and case for an own-initiative opinion

3.1 Given that demographic change – and related modifications in the structure of the population and society – is a recent phenomenon, further knowledge is needed in order to be able to gauge the impact on overall social development and establish a sound basis for timely policy planning decision-making and action at both national and European level. EESC opinions and Commission communications on issues such as employment policy (1), social integration (2), health care, lifelong learning (3) etc. also point in this direction.

3.2 A knowledge base of this kind is also the sine qua non for social, cultural, organisational, economic and technological innovations that make it possible not only to maintain elderly people’s quality of life, but also to help take some of the strain off health and social security systems. The rapidly growing numbers of very old people in particular and – to some extent as a consequence of that – the fact that several generations of older people are alive at the same time also necessitates entirely new services and occupations.

3.3 Some important findings have already been made on this front thanks to projects supported as part of the fifth Framework Programme for Research (FP5) (key action 6 The ageing population under the thematic programme Quality of Life and Management of Living Resources). DG Research has recently published a mid-term assessment on findings and experience in this multidisciplinary key action. Implementing the findings of the telematics programme can also help improve the quality of life of older people and people with a disability. The holistic approach pursued under the telematics programme in the late 1990s has yet, however, to be universally taken up.

3.4 Under the sixth Framework Programme for Research (FP6), support for research into population ageing and its impact on individuals and society is only being pursued in a few subsidiary areas of the key actions Life sciences, genomics and biotechnology for health (Priority 1), Information society technologies (Priority 2), Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society (Priority 7) and RTD supporting policies and anticipating scientific and technological needs (Priority 8), as well as ERA-NET.

3.4.1 Key policy findings are to be expected particularly from current Priority 8 projects on demographic perspectives


(3) Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 (2002/C 163/01), OJ C 163, 9.7.2002; COM(2002) 678 final (November 2001); cf. also COM(2004) 156 final and on health costs and expenditure against the backdrop of an ageing society. The IST programme’s particular strategic objective is to promote the integration of older and disabled people into the information society. In this area too, there are a range of useful findings and promising projects involving major consortia and industry. That said, considerable efforts are still required to bridge the remaining gaps. The ageing population, however, is no longer included as a key action in its own right within the thematic priorities.

3.5 The medical and biological projects supported under FP5 and FP6 are expected to greatly enhance our knowledge of the physiological and biological ageing processes, disease control and health promotion and preservation.

3.6 Findings on this front are undoubtedly important, but they cannot resolve the problems of elderly people or, in the short term, help get to grips with the social challenges facing Europe as a whole as numbers of older – and particularly very old people – continue to rise. Because of the relatively low birth rate, the percentage of young people (under 20) in the population of the EU as a whole dropped from 32 % in 1960 to 23 % in 2001, while the percentage of older people (aged 60 and over) rose from 16 % to 22 % over the same period. The old-age dependency ratio – i.e. the percentage of the population aged 60 and over in relation to the percentage aged between 20 and 39 – rose from 29.5 % to 38.9 % over this period. In the next few years, the percentage of older people is set to rise further as the birth deficit of the last thirty years kicks in. In 2020, older people will make up 27 % of the population. In other words, more than a quarter of all Europeans will then be aged 60 or over. (4) Numbers of very old people are rising particularly rapidly (see also point 4.3.1 below). Research must be conducted on a much broader field, given the sheer scope of population ageing – and its as yet unforeseeable impact – in so many different spheres of society. Ageing itself is not simply a biological process but involves many different facets over a period of many years, and by the same token research into old age and ageing must adopt a long-term, multi- and interdisciplinary approach. Research cannot seek only to improve health and extend life expectancy, but must also work to help improve people’s quality of life in the extra years given to them.

3.7 The seventh Framework Programme for Research (FP7) should therefore include a key action on the challenges of demographic change. This will supplement the largely medical and biological research that has been conducted up to now, by also looking at the social, behavioural, cultural, socio-economic and preventive aspects throughout a person’s life. Such a holistic approach to research must include both fundamental research and practical R&D. (1) The most representative European older people's organisations should also be involved, as recommended in the second International Plan of Action on Ageing adopted at the second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid in April 2002 and in the strategy adopted by UNECE at the ministerial conference in Berlin in September 2002. Promoting research of this kind is of the utmost urgency given the long and complex political decision-making process involved. Research needs in a number of fields are set out in more detail below.

4. Individual research needs

This own-initiative opinion focuses on areas where research is needed so that the people of Europe can lead a life worth living - including as they grow older - in an environment of demographic change. Issues to be looked at include the ageing processes and living conditions of older people themselves, which can vary widely across Europe, and also the general conditions obtaining in society as a whole, which also differ considerably in individual countries.

Demographic change has many facets, but this opinion addresses only those areas in which there is a particularly strong need for innovation, and thus for more interdisciplinary research.

4.1 Research needs in economic and financial policy

4.1.1 One initial key aspect that is not given due attention in the sixth Framework Programme for Research is the socio-economic outlook in the wake of what the European Commission Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs believes will be the serious impact of demographic change. A solid knowledge base is therefore needed that makes it possible to link income and employment data with data on health and social behaviour. Sound forecasts require the consistent gathering of statistics over relatively long periods. (Good examples include the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing [ELSA], which also looks at health issues, and the US Health and Retirement Survey [HRS]). For research, this raises the following questions:

— There is a great deal of uncertainty about demographic forecasts, but policymakers have to make practical plans for healthcare, social provision and pensions. What data are required and need to be collected to back up policies of this kind?

— How important is demographic change for consumption and savings? How are people likely to behave and what behaviour is appropriate given longer life expectancy?

— What kind of link exists between an ageing population and productivity? What is the impact on productivity, innovation and entrepreneurship?

— What can be done to exploit the potential advantages of demographic change - in terms of new products and services - so as to benefit older people both today and in the future and boost Europe's economic development (under the watchword of the 'knowledge economy')?

— How are the older people of the future likely to behave economically, given that they will to a large extent be healthier, better educated and more mobile than the present generation of older people but are likely to be worse off, particularly when they come from the more disadvantaged groups in society? (cf. also points 4.2.1 and 4.3.6).

4.2 Research needs in work and employment

4.2.1 In future, the shift in the population age structure and the resultant need to redistribute scarce resources which cannot be increased in proportion to the demand will make it necessary for businesses and social security systems - and for the ageing population itself - to rely longer than at present on older people's working skills and knowledge (2). It is a known fact that older people are generally no less productive than younger people, although some skills decline while others increase. The following issues thus require research:

— In which fields are older workers able to put their skills to particularly good use, even with increasing age?

— What alternative job opportunities and structures need to be put in place to keep employment an attractive option for older people too? Would, for instance, temporary work be a feasible way forward?

(1) COM(2004) 9 final; cf also COM(2002) 565 final, especially points 3.3 and 4.2

(2) Cf. also point 4.7 of the EESC opinion on innovation policy, OJ C 10, 14.1.2004. (COM(2003) 112 final)
— How can health and safety in the workplace be improved so that workers can play an active part in working life for longer?

— What arrangements are needed in the workplace and the working environment and for patterns and organisation of work to give older people the best possible environment in which to work? How can applied technology help?

— What in particular can be done to get the long-term unemployed back to work, and those who have not been in gainful employment for some time for other reasons (e.g. parenting or family care commitments)?

— Why do firms let older workers go? Why is unemployment rising among older women in particular?

— What obstacles stand in the way of older people working longer or taking up new employment and how can these obstacles be removed?

— With regard to the transition from full-time employment to retirement, how flexible can and must the arrangements be to ensure that they are of benefit to older workers, businesses and social security systems alike?

— What schemes can and must be devised for knowledge transfer so that older workers' skills and wide experience over many years can be passed on in such a way that younger people are happy to take 'old' knowledge on board and make it a part of their 'new' body of knowledge, both for their own benefit and the benefit of their company?

— For continuing education, see point 4.5.

The growing percentage of older people among the population at large also makes it necessary to expand existing occupations and create new ones. Information is lacking, however, as to the areas in which it is particularly urgent to broaden occupational skills to meet the demands and needs of older people, and the areas in which new activities are necessary and where these offer new employment opportunities.

These developments should be considered

— in terms of changes to income and consumption patterns linked to demographic change (cf. also points 4.1.1 and 4.3.6);

— in terms of older people's declining mobility: possible options for consideration here include new domestic services such as home-visit hairdressing or chiropody and remote services such as teleshopping, teleconsultation and the like;

— For specific health- and care-related employment issues, see point 4.6.

4.3 Research needs in elderly people's everyday lives

4.3.1 Ageing is not only a biological process, but also – and in particular – a social one. Social conditions vary greatly both within and between the various European countries. This applies both to the macro level – the political and social systems that have grown up historically over time – and also to the micro level – people's individual life histories and resources. Hence, the environment for ageing and old age also varies among individual social groups. These differences – whether they relate to gender, life history and/or professional experience, material living conditions etc. – must be taken into account when researching the everyday realities of older people's lives.

4.3.2 European countries differ widely in terms of climate, topography, population density and types of settlement, transport infrastructure, welfare provisions and many other aspects that influence a person's capacity to lead an independent life and play an active part of society. Some countries have minimum pensions that provide an adequate financial basis for older people to live a contented life. In others, pensions fail even to meet basic needs. Major differences exist both between and within individual countries and within the large group formed by older people.

— What impact do European countries' various welfare systems have on their older citizens' quality of life?

— What preventive measures can be taken to compensate for the disadvantages that make it harder for older people to access reasonably priced accommodation, decent transport, cultural resources, healthy food and/or new technologies, and thus impair their quality of life?

— Given the cutbacks in social security benefits and health care, what in particular can be done to maintain the quality of life of those older people whose existence – both physical and social – is threatened by poverty, chronic illness, poor education, inadequate linguistic knowledge or lack of other resources?

— How do people live who cannot – or can no longer – maintain an independent lifestyle under their own steam? What arrangements are in place for such people in the EU Member States and what action is needed to safeguard their interests?

— What is the situation regarding older people's living conditions in homes and institutions? In what ways are their interests represented?
What is done in terms of prevention, treatment and care environment in the EU Member States for patients with Alzheimer's disease and people suffering from other forms of dementia? What options are available and what experience has been gained with different kinds of accommodation?

4.3.3 Independence, self-determination and social integration are key personal and socio-political goals. A number of factors compromise the ability of older – and, in particular, very old people – to achieve these goals. For one thing, as people grow older, they are increasingly susceptible to health problems. When that happens, poor environmental conditions and financial constraints make it more difficult for older people to keep their independence and continue to play a part in society. Social norms and preconceptions – for instance, the discriminating perceptions people have of the elderly – may also act as barriers and exclude older people from key areas of society. A counter to the negative picture of ageing, however, is the fact that the vast majority of older people are able to live independent and autonomous lives for many years. They also play a key role in families and society through intergenerational support (both social and financial) and unpaid work in political, trade union and church bodies.

4.3.4 Older people have many of the psychological skills needed to cope with many difficulties beyond their control and the health constraints they face. However, there is a risk of this inner equilibrium being upset when problems accumulate.

— What action is needed – and when – to prevent older people being put under too much of a strain and to help them cope with life's critical situations?

— What measures are required to cover more than the bare necessities, such as the psychological need for security, for family and other interpersonal relations and for social inclusion?

4.3.5 The vast majority of older people can lead a relatively healthy and active life in old age for some 20 to 30 years. As this is a recent phenomenon, there are, as yet, few precedents on which to draw for shaping this phase of life. There are virtually no reliable figures, comparable across Europe, for those areas in which older people are currently active and make a key contribution to society and the economy. These areas include taking on paid and/or unpaid work in political, trade union and church organisations and providing support, education and training for younger people.

— What can be done to provide activities, training facilities, involvement opportunities and meeting places to help each individual turn the potential advantages of these years to good account in a way that both gives meaning to his or her life and benefits society?

— To what extent do the interests, experiences, needs and skills of older men and women differ? How can and must these differences be factored in?

— How can older people become involved at the various national and European levels – either directly or through their representative organisations – in decision-making processes that impact their right to lead a life of dignity and independence and to participate in social and cultural life in order to make Article 25 of the Fundamental Rights Charter a reality?

— To what extent is there a need among older people – and older migrants in particular – for interregional and cross-border mobility and what can be done, as in the case of workers, to help meet such needs?

4.3.6 Discussions about the ageing society focus almost exclusively on the issue as a problem and a burden, against the backdrop of burgeoning social security and health costs. The positive aspects, however, are rarely considered and little information is available on them. These include, for instance, the fact that older people no longer put a strain on the labour market but, as consumers, continue to play a role in economic development.

— How do income and consumption patterns differ between older and younger people?

— What changes in consumer behaviour are to be expected from new generations?

— Which areas have particular potential for innovation so that, in future, better account can be taken of older peoples' specific needs?

— On this point, cf. also points 4.1.1 and 4.2.1.

4.3.7 The current debate about health care problems, pension financing and – in some countries – euthanasia is making many older people feel they are more of a burden than a valued member of society.

— What can be done overall to make older people’s contribution – both material and non-material – to so many different sectors of society more visible and more valued?
— What social policy measures are needed so that older people no longer have any cause to feel they are little more than a ‘liability’?

— What can be done to change negative attitudes to ageing so that old age is better accepted, making for a positive culture of ageing? How can younger people be encouraged to develop a greater understanding of older people and what can be done to promote dialogue both within and between the generations? (cf. also point 4.5.2)

— What can be done to present a more nuanced picture of old age in the media?

— Death and dying are largely taboo subjects but are nonetheless a significant economic factor. What can be done to prevent death from simply becoming commercialised and, instead, to develop an ethically responsible culture of dying?

— What can be done to present a more nuanced picture of old age in the media?

4.4 Research needs in the social and spatial environment

4.4.1 Older people’s social environment is set to change dramatically over the next few years. Low birth rates, later parenthood and high divorce rates are eroding the traditional network of family relationships. Also, longer life expectancy makes it increasingly common for up to five generations of a single family to be alive at the same time (‘beanpole families’).

— How do these changes impact older people’s integration and participation in society?

— Will future generations increasingly be able to fall back on relationships outside the family and can these be relied upon even when support is needed?

— What social policy measures and/or organisational and technical innovations can help support networks both inside and outside the family in order to make them more resilient and longer lasting?

4.4.2 Time-budget and mobility studies show that, as people get older, they spend increasing amounts of time at home and devote correspondingly less time to outside activities.

— What can be done, at minimum cost, to adapt housing – particularly rented flats in large older buildings, but also family homes as well – so that older people can continue to live independently and, if necessary, be cared for at home even if their physical, sensory and cognitive faculties decline?

— What overall considerations should be borne in mind when modernising housing so that people can continue for as long as possible to live in their own homes?

— What architectural or technical measures may be brought in to help maintain the independence of older people suffering specific impairments such as hearing and sight problems, restricted mobility or dementia?

— How in particular can innovative ‘intelligent living’ concepts help make it possible for people to live independently and run their own homes for longer?

— What positive experience does Europe already have in these areas? What lessons can be learnt from it?

4.4.3 As they become increasingly frail, most elderly people are horrified by the thought of having to move into a nursing home.

— What attractive but nonetheless affordable alternatives are on offer if an older person’s own home becomes a burden and leading an independent life is no longer possible?

— What experience has so far been gained with new patterns of living such as sheltered accommodation? What basic conditions contribute to the success or failure of these and similar alternatives?

4.4.4 Technical devices, systems and services can be a major asset for older people in dealing with day-to-day problems, but often they are not adapted to older people’s needs. Appliances may be modelled on the ‘design for all’ principle and should be readily adaptable to various user groups. It is vital, therefore, that future users should be involved in their development in order to boost the quality of products and services. In this case, the Committee would recommend the consultation and active involvement of the most representative European older people’s organisations – and of older people themselves – so that there is constant interaction (‘social audit’) about what older people actually need.

— What do producers and designers need to know about the ‘Design for All’ approach and methodology and about the skills, limitations, needs and attitudes of older people so that technical appliances are properly adapted and can be accepted and better used by older people?

— What changes occur as people grow older and what changes might occur in new generations of older people?
— How can older people's changing skills and needs be more effectively factored into the design of mainstream technologies than has been the case up to now? What appropriate policies can be put in place to ensure the closer involvement of trade and industry in achieving the 'Design for All' objective?

— What can be done to involve users effectively in the development of technical appliances?

More detailed research is also required to establish which technical aids are really needed and the conditions that must be in place so that such aids can help improve older people's quality of life.

— How can such aids help older people meet everyday requirements? How can they give support to formal and informal carers and service providers in cases where older people are care-dependent or suffer from dementia-related illnesses?

— What ethical aspects must be borne in mind (e.g. where older people become confused) so that privacy is not infringed, for instance, by technical monitoring devices?

— What innovations do new technologies offer and what is the long-term impact of their use? What social back-up measures are needed so that such technologies help improve quality of life and keep older people involved in society, rather than making them socially isolated and disadvantaged?

4.4.5 Physical, social and cultural activities are known to promote healthy and happy ageing. Often, however, obstacles in the natural and/or built environment – or a lack of transport – block access to the requisite facilities. The problems are broadly known (1) but implementation is often lacking.

— What can and should be done with particular urgency in the fields of social, urban and transport planning so that residential areas, road infrastructure, transport, service facilities etc. meet the needs of the increasing numbers of older people and are conducive to helping them stay independent?

— How in particular can the quality of the living environment help integrate older people into society – for instance by providing meeting places and appropriate transport facilities?

— Which countries have already gained good experience on this front, and in which specific fields, and how can that be transferred to other countries and other fields?

4.4.6 Frequently, lack of social and financial resources and/or physical or sensory impairments prevent people from accessing and becoming involved in activities outside their homes. Involvement in social and cultural activities, however, would be particularly important for such people – often older women living alone – to prevent them becoming isolated.

— What social policy and/or organisational and technical innovations might help needy older people to become involved in community life?

4.5 Research needs with regard to lifelong learning

4.5.1 In a society of rapid social, cultural and technical change, lifelong learning is becoming ever more important. This applies in particular to older workers whose skills acquired in the past no longer meet modern employment requirements. The aim of making a European area of lifelong learning a reality has already been highlighted in a joint communication from DG Education and Culture and DG Employment and Social Affairs, and in a Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 (2). On this front too, there is still an urgent need for research:

— What kind of further training is most effective for older workers in terms of both content and approach?

— What can be done so that all workers benefit equally from appropriate measures regardless of age or sex?

4.5.2 However, the need for lifelong learning also affects people no longer in employment. They too need to have the opportunity for further development both for their own sake and that of society:

— How is knowledge generated and disseminated in the knowledge society?

— What can be done to better promote lifelong learning among older people regardless of whether they are employed or not? What arrangements are already in place in the Member States today for involvement in education and information programmes on job-related issues or cultural themes and what experience has been gained, for instance, with third-age universities or symposia on various issues?


— Is there a link between a person's occupation earlier in life and later further education? Can conclusions be drawn from training undertaken during active working life as to how older people's desire for learning, education and culture can be maintained?

— What can be done to make learning opportunities more accessible, also for groups that have so far been underrepresented, and to secure cultural diversity?

— What role can be played by public service media, new technologies and e-learning in keeping people involved in society, disseminating knowledge and information and promoting further education for older people?

— What basic skills are particularly important in old age? (cf. also point 4.6.1)

— Conversely, what basic knowledge should people and organisations dealing with older people have about old age and ageing? What kinds of education initiatives help younger people better understand older people? (cf. also point 4.3.7)

— How can implementation of previously adopted measures be monitored and positive experience passed on?

4.6 Research needs with regard to maintaining a healthy life and care requirements

4.6.1 One particularly serious consequence of demographic change is the additional costs charged to social security and health systems as a result of the rapid growth in the numbers of very old people. Over the next fifteen years, the number of 80-year-olds is expected to increase by 50% across Europe to over 20 million. (1) Numbers of centenarians are rising exponentially. (2) Research is thus of key importance, particularly in the area of prevention, and with regard to maintaining and restoring elderly people's mobility and independence.

— What is the long-term impact of certain lifestyles on health in general and specific illnesses in particular? How can sound habits be promoted?

— How are older people to be encouraged to maintain healthy lifestyles (e.g. by engaging in sports and artistic/aesthetic pursuits, or eating healthily)?

— What else can be done to preserve physical, sensory, cognitive and social skills?

— There is a particular need for research into the epidemiology and aetiology of age-related illnesses in order to improve preventive measures (e.g. with regard madness, especially to Alzheimer's disease, or to prevent falls that may result in hip fractures).

— There is an urgent need for research into preventive measures and health maintenance at the workplace (see also point 4.2.1).

— Research is also needed into treatment options for older people, both in terms of general illnesses with age-specific characteristics and of specifically age-related diseases. The therapeutic base for this is often lacking as clinical trials and pharmaceutical tests are largely carried out on younger adults only. Older people's state of health is not comparable as, often, they do not suffer from one specific illness, but may have functional impairments of varying severity in a number of different areas at the same time.

— Cf. also point 4.6.3.

4.6.2 Care requirements are set to rocket in the next few years as the numbers of very old people rise, and the strain on the public and private purse increases. A number of areas here also require research.

— What can and must be done to improve the skills and working conditions of care staff so that caring remains an attractive profession in the long term?

— What must be done in the wider context and in staffing terms to ensure that the relationship between carer and the person being cared for develops to the satisfaction of all concerned?

— How can care provision be better adapted to the needs and requirements of care-dependent older people and what can be done to give more support than hitherto to care in the home?


— How can technical solutions help relieve the strain on carers – both family members and professionals – without impinging on the integrity and dignity of the person being cared for?

— What economic support and social recognition are needed to relieve the strain on carers – both family members and professionals? What in particular can be done to support family carers by, for instance, making sure they have their own pension cover?

— What can be done in terms of general care, pain therapy and palliative care so that life ends with dignity?

4.6.3 Europe has no harmonised definitions of care concepts (such as ‘dependent’ or ‘domestic carer’), no uniform structures within the various services involved and no directives on the skills required of staff.

— What action can be taken to harmonise the terms used in this area and thus make the care field more transparent?

— What programmatic, technical, geriatric and socio-psychological knowledge and skills are desirable for the qualifications of medical and care staff across Europe?

4.7 Research needs and new technologies

4.7.1 The acknowledged rapid and ongoing spread of technology, and especially the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), impacts on all the areas mentioned in points 4.1 to 4.6 above. On the jobs front, for instance, these technologies often serve as a reason for excluding older workers. Yet studies have shown that adapting to such new conditions may even make older workers more productive. This factor must therefore be incorporated into all fields of research. Consideration must be given in particular to ethical aspects and to the question of integrating older people who cannot or will not take technical innovations on board.

— An advantage would be gained by processing these bodies of knowledge in such a way that they could be readily merged, systematically compared and assessed, and, ultimately, made available across the board.

— The next steps would be to undertake secondary analyses of material processed in this way and to coordinate study methods and tools for further joint interdisciplinary research. The new tools provided under the sixth Framework Programme for Research – i.e. ‘Centres of Excellence’, ‘Networks of Excellence’ and ‘Thematic Coordination Actions’ – are good ways to help generate, integrate and further develop knowledge of this kind. (1)

— It would also be desirable to adopt a uniform approach to – and classification of – indicators of older people’s quality of life in European countries and to monitor and document these indicators in the long term in a European database. It is vital to differentiate between men and women and between age groups, income brackets and regions, as indicators used to date to determine older people’s living conditions are inadequate. Additional indicators are needed, including health and impairment data, and information on care systems and requirements specific to a particular country. Consideration should be given to working together with EUROSTAT.

— It is essential to bring together and collate the statistics and other relevant information currently available at national and European level. Research findings from the various areas of the fifth and sixth Framework Programmes for Research also need to be looked at in their entirety in order to be able to draw practical policy conclusions. It is vital to disseminate information collated and processed in this way at the earliest possible stage.

— In order to undertake research and make policies not only for, but also with older people, senior citizen organisations should be more involved in future projects than they have been to date.

5. Aims and recommendations

5.1 This own-initiative opinion makes the case for including, in the seventh Framework Programme for Research, a key action on Demographic change – quality of life of elderly persons and technological requirements.

(1) Cf. Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Towards a European research area. OJ C 204, 18.7.2000
5.2 The goal is to promote multi- and inter-disciplinary and socially participatory research into a wide range of ageing issues needed.

a) to establish the knowledge base required for political planning and action to deal with the impact of Europe's changing age structure in an innovative, socially just and cost-effective way; and

b) to provide the bases and tools required to achieve a more appropriate understanding and appreciation of older people in society.

5.3 As the research fields outlined above – and the examples of related questions – have hopefully shown, there are close links between the biological, psychological, social, cultural, technological, economic and structural aspects of old age and ageing. People always age within a specific spatial and social environment. In geographical, cultural and socio-structural terms, this environment varies widely both between and within individual European countries. Both these factors – the fact that the ageing process has many different dimensions and involves many different disciplines – make a multi- and interdisciplinary approach to gerontological research essential. Such research must also take the long-term view in order to identify changes and incorporate them accordingly. (1)

5.4 Given the changes in the population age structure, this broad and long-term research is the only way to provide the sound basis for planning and decision-making needed in the many different areas of society involved and at all tiers of decision-making. Ageing is not only a biological, medical, technical and economic issue, but a social and cultural task as well.

5.5 In addition to the research activities outlined above, the Committee also calls for the following flanking measures:

— to stage a hearing at the EESC on demographic change and older people's quality of life, in order, among other things, to propose a feasibility study for an appropriate agency and for any other initiative that might prove necessary;

— to set up a joint, pro-active and forward-looking Agency on Ageing (European observatory) to bring together indicators on older people's quality of life in European countries and to monitor and document these indicators in the long term in a European database; to draw up empirically-based forecasts of this kind; to collate and disseminate knowledge; and to draw practical policy conclusions;

— to stage workshops and conferences to increase knowledge of demographic change; highlight the urgent need for preventive and flanking measures; raise awareness of the positive potential of ageing; combat age-discrimination; spread information about research findings as widely as possible; and foster exchanges between the old and the new Member States;

— to press ahead in this area via the open method of coordination; given the complexity and the importance of population ageing and the differing opportunities and challenges involved, the Committee feels this method is a good way to launch exchanges of experiences, make inter-European comparisons and foster mutual learning;

— to promote dialogue between representatives of organised civil society and the appropriate Commission DGs; (2)

— to lay down joint goals;

— to monitor implementation of the second International Plan of Action on Ageing (adopted in Madrid in April 2002) and the UNECE implementing strategy (adopted at the ministerial conference in Berlin in September 2002), and

— to establish an area of common values in relation to the ageing society.

5.6 The ultimate aim is to make life in Europe worth living — not least for older people. This includes not only those who are elderly or very old today, but also future generations, both young and old.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESENCH


(2) Communication from the Commission COM(2002) 277 final