

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the EU
(2009 Ageing Report)**

(2010/C 232/02)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS ISSUES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- observes that more than 60 regions already have an old-age dependency of more than 29 %, and more than 70 regions are having to deal with a falling population (in some regions the population has fallen by more than 1 % per annum);
- views the ageing of the population as a topic that should be dealt with as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, and aims to make use of the opportunities that this ageing provides for increasing social, economic and territorial cohesion;
- advocates an area-specific approach to dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the fields of (1) healthy ageing; (2) labour market participation and productivity; and (3) access to services and facilities;
- offers to work with the Commission to launch various transregional and interregional pilot schemes based on the three main priorities. These pilot schemes primarily aim to exchange knowledge and best practices;
- endorses the initiative of holding a 'year of healthy and active ageing and solidarity between the generations' with the full participation of children, in the next Commission term, and sees the priorities and the proposed pilot schemes as important elements of this year.

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

1. welcomes the Commission's communication on dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the European Union, which states that the ageing population will have a significant impact on pensions, health care and long-term care. The Commission communication emphasises that governments have a window of opportunity of less than ten years before the baby-boom cohorts retire; this presents a considerable level of urgency and major challenges and opportunities, which require targeted policy interventions. The actions taken to address the ageing of this cohort have to be very closely associated with gender equality policies in order to redress the current situation of greater poverty or less advantageous socio-economic conditions amongst elderly women, together with a poorer quality of life due to higher morbidity and greater dependency, closely linked to gender-based determining factors;

2. thanks the local and regional authorities, non-governmental organisations and the Committee's other partners for their active contributions to the process of drafting this opinion, particularly during the ECOS meeting on 4 September 2009, the round table discussion on 18 November 2009 and the task force meeting on 14 December 2009;

3. emphasises that the ageing population cannot be viewed in isolation, but forms part of a wider demographic transition. This transition is significantly changing the size and make-up of the population at local and regional level. A wide variety of factors affect the precise development and impact of this demographic transition (birth rate, mortality rate, immigration and people's willingness to move). The ageing of the population is a self-seeding process, and awareness and recognition of this process are essential in order to succeed in dealing with the impact of an ageing population;

4. observes that the ratio of four people of working age for every person aged over 65 is going to change to a ratio of two people of working age for every older person. This is a long-term forecast; although it is worthwhile to look at long-term forecasts, the ageing of the population is not an issue for tomorrow or the day after, but an issue for today. More than 60 regions already have an old-age dependency of more than 29 %, and more than 70 regions are having to deal with a falling population (in some regions the population has fallen by more than 1 % per annum);

5. notes that elderly women, the disabled and immigrants may experience particular challenges for healthy aging which need to be addressed;

6. views the ageing of the population as a topic that should be dealt with as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, and aims to make use of the opportunities that this ageing provides for increasing social, economic and territorial cohesion. The Europe 2020 strategy works on the basis that each individual and each region contributes to the strength of the EU, thanks to their specific qualities and characteristics. European citizens who remain active and healthy as they get older have much largely untapped potential. This calls not only for policy targeted at older people, but for policy targeted at all European citizens at all stages of life;

7. has previously noted that the impact of the ageing population is primarily felt at local level. Regional and local governments have important tasks with regard to health, welfare, paid and unpaid care, the labour market and the provision of services and facilities for housing, (public transport and education. It is the responsibility of local and regional authorities to find creative and innovative ways to deal with the impact of the ageing population within the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. This will require solidarity between older and younger people, between areas with growing and falling populations, between urban and rural areas and between regions and Member States.

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

8. advocates setting three main priorities as a 'new deal' for dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the EU, which will need to be put into operation in interregional or transregional pilot schemes. These priorities are in line with the Commission's objectives. The focus is on the primary local and regional responsibilities surrounding health and care, the labour market and the provision of facilities:

- **Healthy ageing**, with the aim of helping people in Europe to stay healthy and active for as long as possible;

— **Labour market participation and productivity**, with the aim of promoting a European society where lifelong learning, participation and making a contribution to the development of society, including the possibility of paid/unpaid work, are available to everybody;

— **Access to services and facilities**, with the aim of reassessing the facilities provided to the ageing population;

9. notes that there is a direct link between the three priorities, and therefore advocates a horizontal approach: people who remain in good health as they age find it easier to make use of services and facilities, and have more opportunities on the labour market; a healthy working population and good services and facilities are essential to increasing productivity; and services and facilities can also make a contribution to healthy ageing and to increasing labour market participation and productivity; also advocates a gender approach that encourages healthy ageing under equal conditions for men and women;

10. recognises a clear social agenda within these priorities. European society demonstrates its solidarity in its interactions with older people, including combating discrimination in all its forms (particularly age discrimination), removing obstacles that prevent older people participating in society, and providing an effective social safety net. People who make use of this safety net must be able to count on being treated with dignity. This social agenda is the joint responsibility of public authorities and their (social) partners;

11. endorses the initiative of holding a 'year of healthy and active ageing and solidarity between the generations' with the full participation of children, in the next Commission term, and sees the priorities and the proposed pilot schemes as important elements of this year;

12. observes that we can also build on local players who work to keep citizens (particularly older people, in the context of this opinion) active in society. Absorbing the impact of an ageing population requires cooperation with all of civil society, including the active involvement of individuals, organisations within society, knowledge institutions and private organisations. The social initiative of these groups makes the difference, and is indispensable in designing and implementing the proposed pilot schemes;

HEALTHY AGEING

Staying healthy and active for as long as possible

13. understands healthy ageing to include all activities that help to combat the negative impact of the physical, psychological and social ageing process. Healthy ageing requires an integrated, life-long approach (starting during childhood), focusing on the causes of health problems that develop over the course of a person's life and also looking at the possibilities for effective prevention and the environmental factors that affect people's health;

14. sees the ageing of the European population very much as a positive (independent) development and a sign of prosperity. Healthy ageing comes down to how people can remain fit and well and continue to play an active part in society, with the emphasis on making a social and economic contribution. It is not (the biological) lifetime, but the life situation, that is the key here;

15. notes that healthy ageing makes it possible to reduce the increase in costs as a result of population ageing: the healthier people remain as they age, the longer they can continue to contribute socially and economically to society. Promoting healthy ageing will require new socio-political thinking innovations, research (into treatments and other areas such as technical aids) and a broad-based approach to cities or surroundings suitable for the elderly with the corresponding to the range of available products. It is also essential to encourage skilled professionals essentially into the social and health care areas by expanding teaching programmes in university or non-university curricula focusing on ageing, so as to have trained and qualified professionals dealing with the various aspects of ageing, especially by encouraging professional profiles that can address treatments, dependence and health promotion. Healthy ageing thus makes a practical contribution to the Europe 2020 strategy;

16. in order to reduce the cost related to an ageing population, the competent authorities should put in place policies which allow for, and encourage elderly people to stay at home as long as possible;

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17. aims to ensure that the regions of Europe actively look for overlaps within their own policy on healthy ageing: they can work together to find the best ways of encouraging innovation and research in the field of healthy ageing and of monitoring progress. In order for this approach to succeed, a targeted innovation policy will be needed. The various authorities, together with their (knowledge) partners, must take the lead in promoting healthy ageing;

18. calls for cooperation both within and between regions, and has identified the following central tasks in relation to healthy ageing (the emphasis here is on health; the other priorities put the emphasis on economic participation and the provision of services and facilities, respectively):

- *Laying a healthy foundation at a young age.* Healthy ageing needs a good start. The earlier health risks such as excess weight, eating habits and lifestyle are dealt with, the better the prospects;
- *Adequate care and rapid reintegration.* If a person encounters health problems at some point in his or her life, the aim is to deal with those problems quickly and efficiently, i.e. cost-effectively; this is the best way to reintegrate people into everyday life and to keep them involved in society, and thus makes a significant contribution to increasing labour market participation and social support;
- *(Long-term) care of the elderly.* Care of the elderly requires a specific approach, firstly because the elderly are, to varying degrees, vulnerable, which may have a significant effect on the success of treatment, and secondly because older people's health problems are increasingly likely to be due to a combination of disorders. The key to providing adequate (long-term) care for the elderly is for care workers to be given appropriate training in modern, effective treatment methods and other health-related aspects (such as rehabilitation);

LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION AND PRODUCTIVITY

Lifelong learning, work and participation for all

19. emphasises that elderly people must have a right to old-age revenue above the poverty threshold to ensure a life in dignity. Many elderly people, in particular women, live in or at risk of poverty;

20. notes that (social) participation contributes significantly to older people's feelings of well-being, with participation in the labour market being the most important aspect of this. It is also important to increase labour market participation and productivity in order to maintain the health of both the economy and government finances and the social security systems against the backdrop of an ageing population. Participation is a right, but, looking to the near future, it is also an obligation for all citizens. This means that both employers and employees need to be flexible, and specifically implies that authorities and the social partners have an obligation to enable unrestricted labour market participation. The Committee of the Regions thus supports a broad non-discrimination directive focusing on the accessibility of various goods and services (an important aspect of which needs to be combating age discrimination). At the moment, there are still big differences in labour market participation between regions and target groups. A modern (ageing) society needs to make the

best possible use of the skills of older people. Providing high-quality, appropriate jobs will enable people to continue working for longer. This involves more than just working conditions: it also relates to variety of work, and so on. It is not acceptable to restrict career progression and exclude people from the labour market on the basis of age or, for instance, sex and (ethnic) background or disability;

21. stresses that education has an important role to play in increasing labour market productivity and participation. It is time for a cultural change towards lifelong skills-based learning and working with the aim of life-long employability, and thus participation (in society). This means that access to services and facilities for training must be guaranteed. The responsibility for achieving this is shared between citizens, public authorities, employers, employees and knowledge institutions;

22. believes that the concept of lifelong skills-based learning and working may ultimately result in retirement being closer to an 'adjusted, i.e. competence-oriented, working phase' in nature. The 'silver economy' provides ample opportunity to become economically stronger. Voluntary work and caring are also very valuable ways of realising this adjusted working phase. The most important thing is for citizens to remain active throughout their lives;

23. believes that (selective) labour migration can also help to combat labour shortages. In that vein, the Commission has stated that a well organised legal immigration policy will have a role to play in filling labour shortages. This could include recognising diplomas and simplifying procedures (taking account of the risk of the possible negative impact of brain drain in the countries of origin);

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24. aims to improve the employability of the whole working population. The best possible use must be made of every person's skills and competences, particularly those of older people. Health and healthy working conditions are crucial factors in people's employability. Making better use of existing skills is, in the first instance, the social partners' responsibility; individuals, both male and female, should be called upon to undertake lifelong learning so that they can continue to take part in the continually changing demands of the society and the economy and take their proper place there. Public authorities have a facilitating and stimulating role. The best possible use must be made of the creativity and entrepreneurship of individuals and private operators; education and higher education establishments must tailor their programmes to the requirements of the elderly in order to enable them to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to this end. Of particular importance is that older citizens are encouraged and assisted in having their competencies accredited and validated;

25. calls for labour market productivity and participation to be stimulated by means of a targeted policy mix tailored to each region and target group. Essential elements include:

- *investing* in education, training and teaching skills, in order to stimulate young people's upward mobility on the labour market;
- *stimulating* measures to improve work-life balance, including, for example, child care, compassionate and parental leave and technological innovations (teleworking);
- *promoting* occupational health. Although average life expectancy is increasing within the EU, people are not staying healthy for longer, which means that the labour market needs to be set up such that people can continue to participate despite any limitations and health problems they may have. Healthy (or healthier) and better facilitated working conditions will be required;
- *accrediting* and *validating* the competencies and experiences of elderly citizens;
- *looking* for smarter options to allow workers from outside the EU onto the European labour market in fields where there are shortages (at the moment, for example, in parts of the care sector and certain knowledge-intensive sectors, but perhaps also in other sectors in the future);

26. stresses that the risk of losing part or all of their pension entitlements when they earn additional income after having reached pensionable age, is often a reason why elderly workers do not stay active. There is a need to explore the possibilities to adopt more flexible rules at the appropriate levels in this regard;

27. underlines the importance of sensibilising companies, in particular human resources managers/recruitment offices to hire staff of advanced age, in particular women. Companies which make particular efforts to ensure internal mobility for elderly workers, to provide flexible working arrangements or which focus training or career development strategies on the specific needs of older workers, should be supported. The European Commission should collect and disseminate best practices in this regard. It is also crucial to sensibilise and inform older employees themselves in this respect;

ACCESS TO SERVICES AND FACILITIES

Reassessing the facilities provided

28. understands the provision of services and facilities to include the general social, economic and territorial (physical) infrastructure that contributes to the quality of local and regional

society. In this connection, it is worth distinguishing between regional and local services and facilities (such as public transport, care, education, social events and health care) and national social arrangements (such as pensions). The provision of services and facilities requires an integrated, coherent approach in order to make use of the social, economic and spatial opportunities;

29. notes that the provision of services and facilities does not match the change in demand due to the ageing of the population. The policy must focus on ensuring that people can make the best possible use of services and facilities, so that they can continue to take an active part in society. Rising demand and inadequate public resources mean that this provision of services and facilities needs to be reassessed. The capacity for innovation needs to be exploited to the full, or implemented in a different way. The ageing of the population also presents an additional challenge when it comes to finding enough properly qualified workers to bear the brunt of keeping services and facilities accessible; increasing labour market participation and productivity will help with this (but other actions will also need to be taken);

30. stresses that services and facilities cannot always continue to be provided in traditional ways in areas undergoing major demographic changes. Different, robust ways of guaranteeing accessibility should be stimulated, for example looking to 'e-inclusion'. This includes e-services such as e-health, e-training, e-care and e-assistance. The traditional, often age-related, distinction between physical facilities and electronic services is becoming increasingly blurred, and in future will require an innovative, area-specific approach. An innovative approach like this must include establishing a regional network of both physical and digitally accessible services and facilities 'telephone trees' could, for example, be a small start;

31. also stresses that a good, well-targeted public transport system will help significantly to keep services and facilities accessible, especially if they are centrally located and a good (public) transport systems. This applies not only to facilities (such as care facilities) for older people, but also, for example, to schools and knowledge institutions for young people and adults. It is important, in this context, for the (public) transport system to be tailored at regional level;

32. refers to the World Health Organisation's initiative to promote 'healthy cities' in which facilities and services, in conjunction with the physical infrastructure, are better tailored for an ageing population. Active participation (by older people) has an important role to play when developing policy surrounding healthy cities. This approach is very much in line with the Committee's aim of accessibility of services and facilities;

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33. aims to enable as many people as possible to make the best possible use of services and facilities, so that they can continue to take an active part in society. In future, the provision of regional and local services and facilities will need to be reassessed in the light of changes in demand, with this demand being based not just on age but more particularly on lifestyle: people with a healthy lifestyle generally need fewer, and different, facilities than those with an unhealthy lifestyle;

34. calls for the development and exchange of knowledge relating to the provision of services and facilities, both within and between regions. The key priority is:

- *to strengthen cooperation.* The provision of services and facilities requires close cooperation. Regional and local cooperation between the authorities, knowledge institutions, organisations within society (in particular NGOs) and business is the driving force in increasing (qualitative and quantitative) support;
- *to stimulate creative entrepreneurship, innovation and e-inclusion* taking the ageing of the European population as a major opportunity for increasing the competitiveness of economic operators. The challenge for regional and local public and private operators is to make use of new ideas and technologies to improve the organisation and funding of the services and facilities they provide. Examples include broadband and e-inclusion (home automation, tele-care, tele-shopping and tele-learning), and also the development of new regional transport systems or the further development of existing public transport systems;
- *to change what is provided.* The provision of services and facilities, both e-based services and informal care services, should be adapted to citizens' changing requirements;
- encourage the use of ICT to achieve greater social and territorial inclusion for the elderly.

CONCLUSIONS

35. advocates an area-specific approach to dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the fields of (1) healthy ageing; (2) labour market participation and productivity; and (3) access to services and facilities. The Committee of the Regions is thus in favour of an integrated approach to the ageing population as part of a wider demographic transition. This approach is based on a lifecycle approach, on making the most of opportunities and on regional differentiation, resulting in a new deal for tackling the impact of an ageing population in the EU that does justice to the responsibility of local and regional authorities to provide creative and innovative solutions in their regions;

36. calls on the *Commission* to pay particular attention to:

- *encouraging* further awareness-raising, knowledge-sharing, technological innovations and the development of best practices and intervention strategies among all players in the EU (non-governmental organisations, knowledge institutions, private operators and public authorities);
- *monitoring and forecasting* of the ageing of the population at regional level, as a vital input for developing and implementing policy. There are major regional differences that do not show up in national monitors but that are indispensable in anticipating the impact of an ageing population;
- *including* the subject of the *ageing of the population as part of a wider demographic transition* in the various European programmes, as a tool to support regional, area-specific, integrated and innovative approaches. In this connection, the regions call for close, direct cooperation with the Commission.

37. offers to work with the Commission to launch various trans-regional and interregional pilot schemes based on the three main priorities. These pilot schemes primarily aim to exchange knowledge and best practices. This clearly goes beyond simply raising awareness: the pilot schemes must implement and exchange practical actions. In view of the integrated nature of the ageing issue, the Committee is keen for knowledge to be exchanged not only within the priorities but also horizontally, between the priorities. The pilot schemes should promote the development of knowledge. When it comes to implementing substantive programmes, the pilot partners can, independently, take advantage of various sources of EU funding. In the brochure 'How to promote ageing well in Europe: instruments and tools available to local and regional actors', the Committee, in collaboration with AGE, has set out what funding sources are available (CoR, 2009). This is a valuable tool in launching pilot schemes. The members of the Committee will draw up proposals in this regard;

38. proposes the following framework for the pilot schemes. The pilot schemes should focus on generating practical knowledge and scientific knowledge (both applied and basic research) that helps to tackle the impact of an ageing population in the EU. Basic research must contribute to reducing future care requirements in the long term, in which connection cohort studies and biobanks are valuable sources of information. In order to find out how people can remain healthier as they age and thus put off the time when they will need care, we need to find out what (cellular)

processes lie behind ageing. Interregional and transregional partnerships of knowledge institutions, (local) authorities and private parties should be established to develop innovative area-specific approaches and test them in practice; the social partners, welfare and care institutions and other non-governmental organisations may also have an important role here. These regional partnerships could be based around specific knowledge competencies or chain cooperation associations available in a given region, or around particular ageing issues that arise in the specific region. One option here is to link up with the existing INTERREG programmes. In addition to the actions listed above for each priority, the following points should be highlighted:

- *Healthy ageing*: strengthening care networks (care comprising cooperation between the various care partners who get involved throughout a citizen's lifetime and associated care

needs) by translating the results of research into new products, technologies and services and using practical experience for research programmes;

- *Labour market participation and productivity*: with the aim of promoting a European society where lifelong learning, participation and making a contribution to the development of society, including the possibility of paid/unpaid work, are available to everybody;
- *Access to services and facilities*: developing area-specific approaches to reassess the facilities provided;

39. calls on the European Parliament to endorse the Committee of the Regions' appeal for the urgent and topical subject of the ageing population (as part of a wider demographic transition) to be tackled at regional level in interregional and/or transregional pilot schemes, and to join it in initiating such schemes.

Brussels, 14 April 2010

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of the Committee of the Regions*
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