

I NTRODUCTION

POLICY DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH ON GENERATIONS AND GENDER¹



Michael Pettigrew@Fotolia

¹ ECE/AC.31/2008/3 – the background note prepared by the UNECE secretariat for the Conference on How Generations and Gender Shape Demographic Change.

POLICY CHALLENGES

Recent and current demographic developments in the UNECE region have important and far-reaching repercussions for all spheres of society and pose numerous challenges to public policy. Notably, most countries of the region have seen the growth in the working-age population, the time of the so-called demographic bonus, gradually come to an end. The need for adaptation concerns a wide range of policy areas, and was summarized in the UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing² and in the León Ministerial Declaration “A Society for All Ages: Challenges and Opportunities”³.

In the interplay of changes in intergenerational and gender relationships, several demographic trends of recent decades have implications on public policy. These include: (a) the decline of fertility to below-replacement levels in most of the region and to very low levels in large parts of it; (b) significant levels of childlessness; (c) increasing age at family formation; (d) increasing prevalence of non-marital partnerships and non-marital childbearing; (e) decreasing stability of co-residential partnerships; and (f) the emergence of non-residential partnerships.

The decline of fertility to very low levels in countries of Southern Europe in the 1980s and in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s has raised concerns, as the continuation of such patterns could lead to marked population decline and could greatly magnify the challenges posed by population ageing in the future. In population policy reviews, most Governments from these countries regard their fertility levels as too low and are thus expected to find use for measures that could counteract this trend.

It is recognized that at the household or individual level, finding a desired balance between work and family life entails difficult choices, which frequently require making certain sacrifices such as having fewer children than intended or giving up a career. Public policy can reduce barriers to parenting and employment, and many countries have embarked on such measures with the general objective of enhancing their citizens’ well-being. As UNECE member States recently recognized in the León

Declaration, family-friendly policies aiming at the reconciliation of work with family life can both counteract a decrease of the birth rate to very low levels and augment the employment rate.

The structure of opportunities and constraints for individuals and households is shaped by public policies pertaining to different areas and the responsibilities of different agencies. The need for coordination between different policy areas is imminent. For example, if reconciliation of work and family life is a policy goal, benefits that allow parents to take time off from employment to care for small children need to be accompanied with actual possibilities for re-entry into the labour market. On another note, measures such as developing an affordable childcare system can serve multiple policy goals: removing barriers from employment and from childbearing, supporting gender equality and responding to child development concerns.

There is consensus that participation and partnership of both women and men are required for a productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibilities with respect to childcare and the maintenance of the household. At the same time, the majority of those with caring responsibilities are women. It is also acknowledged that the increase in women’s labour market participation has not prompted an increase in men’s domestic duties – what is frequently referred to as women’s dual burden. From the point of view of achieving gender equality, public policy needs to include measures counteracting women’s marginalization in professional activities and in social protection systems. While gender equality in itself is an important policy goal, analyses have also revealed that in the context of low fertility, fertility levels remain relatively high when there are high levels of gender equality in the economy, family and society.

Intergenerational solidarity and collaboration are coming under strain due to changes in family patterns and the adjustments in social protection systems triggered by population ageing. At the same time, intergenerational collaboration is vital to supporting adjustments in social protection systems: it fosters social cohesion and helps make the best use of the potentials of persons of all ages. There is evidence of much interaction between generations both in countries with cultural traditions of strong family ties as well as in others. Measures that

² ECE/AC.23/2002/2/Rev.6

³ ECE/AC.30/2007/L.1

support childcare and dependency care, as well as measures that afford a better balance in distributing family and domestic responsibilities, can strengthen intergenerational solidarity.

The UNECE member States have acknowledged the need for more flexible life-course transitions among education, work and retirement. This would release the potential of men and women of all ages for the benefit of society and would recognize their self-fulfilment as individuals, creating a macro-economic effect towards sustainable social protection systems and improving quality of life for citizens. One such significant life-course transition is retirement, which entails an important economic and social change for an individual. While the relatively low employment rates of older workers reflect the early retirement policies promoted in the recent past as a strategy for coping with unemployment, the prevailing challenge now is keeping older workers longer in employment, which has implications on intergenerational relationships.

The trend towards postponing life-events leading to the formation of new families and households has been universal throughout the UNECE region, notwithstanding the differences in its onset and pace between as well as within countries. Prolonged education has been seen as a major factor behind this postponement, but it is also shaped by the labour market and housing policies. This postponement is

known to have had a significant role in the fertility decline. It also has implications on population ageing, leading to an additional decline in the support ratio. At the individual level, the implications of postponement include challenges related to the ability to become pregnant, to carry a pregnancy to term and to the adverse health outcomes for the children of pregnancies late in life. The issue of assisted reproductive technologies and the role of public policy in supporting them come up in this context.

While opportunity structures set by the labour market and social protection systems undoubtedly play an important role for life-course events, changing attitudes, norms and values can explain much of the change in behaviours as well. Subjective dimensions are important in intergenerational and gender relationships. They also operate through norms or preferences for sequencing life-course events such as completing education, starting a partnership or having children, as well as for the appropriate ages of those events. The link between values and demographic behaviour has been one of the central explanatory threads in explaining demographic trends of the recent half-century in Western Europe, and there is evidence of their important role in other parts of the UNECE region as well. Public policy thus needs to be informed about and to consider these aspects.

THE NEED FOR DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

Sustainable responses to policy challenges require that the causes and consequences of the demographic developments be understood and explained. This can be achieved by analyses of the interplay of demographic behaviours and of the broader issues of intergenerational and family relationships, caring and support; gender relations; and the work-life balance. Such analyses should rely on up-to-date data that correspond to the analytic needs.

In parallel with the common features in the demographic development of countries in the UNECE region, there are also pertinent differences in long-term demographic development, in the ways these societies are organized, in their cultural characteristics and in the various policies relevant to family relationships and demographic choices. Disentangling the causes of the differences in demographic reactions requires comparable data

from many countries, representing a considerable variety of demographic, social, welfare and cultural regimes. Such data could only be collected in consolidated international efforts with a high degree of standardization.

Official statistics are an important data source for monitoring demographic developments all over Europe, and regular overviews of basic indicators on demographic processes have proven to be very useful for understanding the trends' of the main features. However, statistics can only provide aggregated information about those aspects of the trends that lend themselves to measurement through administrative records. In most cases, this restricts the analysis to societal-level (macro-level) processes and does not allow for analysis of behavioural mechanisms at the micro-level of individuals and households, which is crucial for understanding the developments.

THE UNECE GENERATIONS AND GENDER PROGRAMME

At the International Meeting on Generations and Gender (Geneva, 2000), UNECE member States invited the UNECE secretariat to organize another round of region-wide data collection and research on population issues, building on the successful experience with the Family and Fertility Surveys in the 1980s and 1990s. The meeting launched the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP), which comprises: (a) a survey covering a broad range of influences on demographic behaviour; (b) a related contextual database of national and regional trends and policies on these issues; and (c) analyses of these data.

The main substantive goal of GGP is to improve understanding of demographic and social developments and of the factors that influence these developments. It covers most of the factors social science has found to play a role in shaping demographic choices in contemporary developed societies. It explicitly takes into account the different societal levels on which the determinants of demographic behaviour operate, and provides comparability between countries as well as with data collected in earlier programmes.

The Programme has been developed by a consortium of institutions, currently consisting of three statistical offices and five research institutions.

The work is carried out in consultation with the GGP International Working Group, which includes population experts from the member States. At its fifth meeting (Ljubljana, January 2007), the International Working Group decided to organize a conference to discuss the related policy issues in the light of the research produced in the Programme.

To date, 12 UNECE countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Romania and the Russian Federation – together with Australia and Japan, have completed data collection in the first panel wave of the Generations and Gender Survey; Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy and the Russian Federation have also completed the second wave. Data collection is under way in Belgium and Norway, and several other countries are taking concrete steps in this direction. The corresponding contextual (macro-level) data has been collected and made available for nine countries: Bulgaria, Canada, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania and the Russian Federation. In the two months since the harmonized data of Generations and Gender Surveys was first made available internationally, 30 research projects have been initiated to analyse them. In addition, numerous national and international studies were produced prior to the launch of the data archive.

OUTLINE FOR THE FUTURE

Along with the research cooperation developing in the GGP framework, UNECE is seeking to promote awareness of the emerging results among policymakers and to provide a platform in which the research findings can be discussed from the point of view of their use in policymaking. The “How Generations and Gender Shape Demographic Change” Conference aimed to cover the policy areas where analyses of the GGP can make a significant contribution. The Conference outcome, in the form of the present publication of proceedings, will contribute to the regional component for the review of implementation of the Programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the fifteenth anniversary of which will be next year. This publication also presents research findings and highlight issues that are relevant for the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Beijing Platform for Action.

For any country, analyses based on data from other countries can provide useful policy-relevant knowledge. However, the specific features of a country can only be addressed using the empirical data collected there. The availability of centrally developed survey instruments and the possibility to compare data with the already participating countries can provide a promising opportunity for those countries considering accession to the GGP. While this would primarily provide added value to the acceding countries themselves, it would also add another reference point for those already in the Programme and enrich the understanding of the processes in the UNECE region as a whole. In particular, many countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia would gain initial benchmarking information on some processes, since they have not participated in previous data collection endeavours of this kind.

It could be envisaged that another general discussion on related policy issues could take place after a significant number of countries have results from at least two panel waves of the survey. This would allow for sharing findings that are broader in scope (e.g. analysis of several issues requires observations

from more than one time) and stronger in providing explanatory evidence. According to the schedule of programme implementation (with a three-year interval between the panel waves), this would be the situation three years from now.