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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Generations and Gender Programme: A Study of the Dynamics of Families and Family Relationships

Advancing knowledge for policy-making
in low-fertility, ageing societies

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Rationale of the Programme

Why a Generations and Gender Programme?

The profound changes in fertility and mortality rates in the industrialised world during the twentieth century, and in particular the recent decline in fertility rates to unprecedented low levels, have brought about major population changes. The populations of today are older than they have ever been. They continue to age and the shifts in their age structures will in many instances accelerate in the next few decades as the post-war baby-boomers enter old age. At the same time, after a prolonged period of population growth, many of these countries are starting to witness declines in their population. In particular, the number of young people is declining and, after a delay, so will the number of the people of working age. At the same time, the number of old people, and in particular the very old, will continue to grow rapidly. For Europe and other industrialised regions that remain essentially closed to permanent immigration, population decline is a highly likely future, although this is less likely for countries that continue to welcome and naturalise foreigners. As the so-called momentum of decline is built into the population age-structures of a number of countries, declines are certain to continue or to emerge, even if fertility were to suddenly recover to replacement level.

These trends have been paralleled by the advent of a new type of intergenerational family, sometimes referred to as the “beanpole family,” a development that is also a consequence of past declines in fertility and mortality. Unlike the family of a few generations ago, the new family is typically smaller and consists by and large of four generations of kin. As a rule, each subsequent generation has fewer members than the preceding one and, as a consequence, the structure by age or generation of this family is increasingly top-heavy. The spread of the “beanpole” family has, in many countries, occurred in tandem with changes in partnership and reproductive behaviour. These have included increasing non-marital cohabitation, growing dissolution and reformation of marital and non-marital unions, and the spread of voluntary childlessness and extra-marital childbearing. These multifaceted changes have greatly affected and, in turn, have been influenced by the dynamics of relationships within the family, particularly the relationships between parents and children and between partners. In the future, the small, shrinking and complex family, with increasingly diverse relationships is likely to become prevalent.

The population and family changes at the dawn of the twenty-first century pose growing challenges for industrialised societies and their main stakeholders, in particular the State and other social partners. These challenges, which may apply with greater force in Europe and Japan than in other parts of the developed world, are diverse and too numerous to fully list here. In order to illustrate this diversity, three of these challenges will be mentioned. First, the continuing ageing of populations translates into increases in the share of national income spent on older people. This places demands on societies to accommodate the increases in ways that can prevent conflicts between different

generations, in particular between the working and the retired. Secondly, the multifaceted changes that families undergo require that the State and other social partners monitor and, when necessary, step in to assist families, so that these can preserve and strengthen the ties that bind their members. Thirdly, in large parts of Europe, it is common that the number of children that people have is smaller by a relatively wide margin than the number they desire. This challenges societies and, in particular, Governments to assist individuals and couples in achieving their desired family size.

If the State and its various partners are to successfully meet these and many other challenges, advances in knowledge in the service of policy-making will have to accelerate. Generations and Gender Programme (GGP), which is being promoted and coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) with the financial backing of the United Nations Population Fund is a scientific effort that has set out to contribute to such advances in knowledge. In doing so, it will seek the advice of policy-makers regarding which issues to research within the chosen confines of the Programme.

What is the goal of the Programme?

The goal of the GGP is a cross-national, comparative, multidisciplinary, longitudinal study of the dynamics of the family and family relationships in the contemporary industrialised countries, in particular in Europe and North America. The specific aim is to improve the understanding of factors - including public policy and programme interventions - affecting the evolution of two principal family relationships: child-parent relationships and partner-partner relationships. The GGP will scrutinise the start, development and end of those relationships of men and women of all age groups from adolescence to old age. The implication of this wide age range is that child-parent relationships will be considered irrespective of whether the child or the parent is young, middle-aged or old.

The focus on the start and end of child-parent and partner-partner relationships will enable research into determinants of demographic behaviour resulting in events marking the opening and closure of the relationships. The events of special interest will include the onset of child-parent relationships of people, no matter whether first or subsequent, that come into being through birth of own children or formation of unions with children's parents. They will also comprise the closure of relationships with stepchildren through dissolution of unions, but not through death, as this will not be a subject of research. The events of interest will also include the beginning and termination of unions of different types, such as marriage and cohabitation, through corresponding forms of formation and break-up. The focus on the development of the relationships will shed light on factors influencing changes in selected dimensions of the relationships, including the closeness of ties and satisfaction with them.

The relationships will be analysed within what the Programme refers to as the mezzo and macro contexts of individuals. The GGP defines the mezzo context as comprising of households, families and social support networks and the macro context as

consisting of communities and societies. It also presupposes that interactions among men and women and among members of different generations permeate these two contexts. Furthermore, its premise is that these interactions have an important, independent bearing on child-parent and partner-partner relationships, specifically their beginning, development and end. It is this specific focus of the GGP on the interactions of the genders and generations and their impact on the child-parent and partner-partner relationships that gave the name to the Programme.

How can the GGP assist policy-making?

Families are the basic unit of society. Their wellbeing and cohesion, as well as their ability to perform their various functions are of critical importance to contemporary societies. Therefore, the need for the State and its partners to support families through the various policies and programmes will, if anything, grow. This support increasingly requires knowledge of the dynamics of families and family relationships capable of informing the policy-making process. Accordingly, the GGP will pursue requisite knowledge by seeking answers to a variety of questions, including the following.

How are the size, structure and composition of families changing over time? What are the main traits of the relationships between generations within families and what changes do these relationships undergo over time? What are the main characteristics of the gender relationships within families and how are they changing – in particular, are they becoming more equitable? What changes in the relationships between children and parents occur as they move along their respective life courses? What changes occur in the relationships between partners, whether they are married or living in consensual unions? How do child-parent and partner-partner relationships interact over time and, in particular, do they tend to reinforce or possibly weaken each other?

The questions will also include as follows. How do the various family characteristics, intergeneration and gender relationships and child-parent and partner-partner relationships vary across industrialised societies? Do the changes they undergo tend to converge or diverge over time? Do these various trends point to a greater or lesser need for public and private support for families? What can different societies learn from each other as regards the interplay of family-support policies and the dynamics of families and family relationships?

As regards factors that influence child-parent and partner-partner relationships, the questions will include the following. How do education, paid and unpaid work, and earnings impact on the start, development and end of the relationships? What influences do housing conditions and the time pressures of contemporary living, as well as beliefs, attitudes and values have on them? How do public policy measures, especially payments to individuals and families, ranging from child allowances to pensions, affect events signifying the start or end of the relationships and the state of the relationships? What effects transfers - monetary and in kind – among members of the different generations within the family have? How do the positions of men and women in the family and society impact on the child-parent and partner-partner relationships?

These research questions illustrate what the GGP, at this time, intends to pursue. If the dialogue between the GGP and policy-makers, which the former will promote, adds other questions, the GGP will consider and accommodate them wherever possible. In particular, to the extent that additional questions can be addressed within the chosen confines of the Programme, they will influence the course that the GGP takes in the future. In sum, the perceived needs of the policy-makers will play a key role in shaping the Programme.

What are broader questions that the GGP will address?

It is hoped that the Programme will help also respond to several broader sets of questions of fundamental importance to contemporary industrialised societies. These questions have proliferated during the last decade or so and until now neither governments nor scholars seem to have good answers to them. Two sets of such questions are singled out below.

First, there are fundamental questions regarding fertility. Why has fertility descended to and remains at unprecedented low levels in large parts of Europe and in Japan? At the same time, why does it remain comparatively high, though still often below replacement levels, in overseas countries of European settlement, as well in several European countries, including France and Norway? Can the State and its social partners, in countries having very low fertility rates, stimulate childbearing by instituting policies and programmes that may be patterned on those that exist in countries with considerably higher fertility? Can specific family-supporting policies and programmes make a difference? Alternatively, do fertility levels depend more on overall welfare regimes and cannot, therefore, be substantially influenced by piecemeal policy interventions? Moreover, is it possible that welfare regimes do not have a strong bearing on childbearing, and that it is rather attitudes, beliefs and values, which by and large are insensitive to policy interventions, that lead to aggregate fertility outcomes which may be contrary to the long-term sustainability of our societies?

Second, there are questions regarding family relationships and how the State can best support the family. How is support within families changing in contemporary industrial societies, especially among the closest of kin and how is it manifested through interpersonal transfers of different forms? In connection with this, do the changes that child-parent and partner-partner relationships are undergoing point to the weakening or strengthening of family bonds and family solidarity and cohesion? What interplay is there between support among family members on the one hand, and support by the State and other social partners on the other? How does support to families, including financial transfers and care services, influence relationships among family members and their wellbeing? Given the transformations that families and family relations are undergoing, what is the most effective way for the State and its social partners to give support to families?

Details of the Programme

What are the GGP's key features?

The GGP follows in the footsteps of the three pan-European demographic survey research efforts conducted between the 1960s and 1990s. The third of these was the Fertility and Family Survey project (FFS), which, in addition to 21 European countries included Canada, New Zealand and the USA. The GGP is drawing lessons from its predecessors, in particular from their achievements and failings, and is building on them. Also, it offers continuity with the FFS, ensuring comparability between FFS data and certain aspects of GGP data, so that investments in the FFS will continue to yield returns for some time to come. However, because of several new key features, the GGP is a fresh beginning. The main innovations are that the Programme is prospective, multidisciplinary, context-sensitive and highly comparative.

Prospective. Unlike its predecessors, the GGP is primarily concerned with the present as it unfolds, rather than with the past. It breaks with the tradition of the past survey research programmes that have been built around one-time cross-sectional surveys, which in addition to current-status information have increasingly placed emphasis on retrospective information, specifically event history data. The GGP is being developed around a prospective longitudinal survey, which, wherever possible, will continue for a decade or longer, making it possible to study the changes of families and family relationships as these occur. The Programme will necessarily pay due respect to the past: to do otherwise would be wrong - the simple fact that our present and future are rooted in our past must not be ignored. The prospective, forward-looking orientation of the Programme will yield knowledge, which being on the “unfolding present” will be so much more relevant to policy-making.

Multidisciplinary. Population scholars increasingly share the view that individual disciplinary perspectives for studying population and family behaviour are incapable of producing major gains in our understanding. As multidisciplinary perspectives appear much more promising, the GGP has embraced a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the dynamics of families and family relationships. To illustrate the point, the Programme does not predict whether it is shifting economic conditions rather than ideational changes that have a greater bearing on the onset of parenthood or conjugal life. Rather, it takes the position that both forces may be found to have a strong impact and thereby opens the door for empirical testing of competing explanations. The multidisciplinary approach of the GGP parallels the decision to design the Programme around a prospective longitudinal survey, as it is this type of survey that is far better than a cross-sectional retrospective survey at measuring time-dependent variables, such as incomes and opinions. Moreover, this approach offers opportunities for policy variables to enter analyses as time-dependent variables and, in the process, contribute to knowledge directly relevant to policy-making.

Context-sensitive. The Programme is at variance with the so-called atomistic or individualistic perspective of human behaviour adhered to in certain strands of

demographic and other behavioural research of the last few decades. The GGP takes the position that the behaviour of individuals, such as their departure from the parental home or a decision to form a new, co-residing union, is influenced by their traits, conditions and beliefs, but is also affected by the context within which they live, including their families, networks, communities and societies. Put differently, the dynamics of families and family relationships is being viewed by the Programme as being context dependent. And central to that context - both at its mezzo and macro levels alike - are intergenerational and gender relationships. The GGP views these relationships as being influenced by and, in turn, having an impact on the policies of the State and its partners.

Comparative. The GGP has been, from its inception, a multi-country, joint comparative effort, which has been developed on the following premises. Firstly, population and family changes in the various contemporary industrialised societies have many features in common. Perhaps with the exception of one or two countries, no country can arrive alone at answers to the many complex questions arising from these changes. Therefore, it pays for countries to join forces and seek answers together and, in the process, reduce the costs of the effort to each one. Secondly, knowledge emanating from the effort will shed light on how each country's policies actually do or could respond to population and family changes. It will provide a basis for countries to learn from each other's policy responses. This may be highly important, as experiences with policies in a given country could possibly be replicated in other countries. And thirdly, in order to enable individual countries to compare themselves with others as much as possible, the GGP will aim at a high level of comparability of data and findings. It will use, among other things, common research instruments and include common definitions of concepts and variables.

What data will the GGP collect and use?

As suggested, the prospective longitudinal survey will be the principal source of GGP data. The survey, which has been entitled the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), will have approximately equal numbers of men and women within the age range 18-79 as respondents. The GGS will request information from these individuals about their current child-parent and partner-partner relationships. The survey will also collect data on the individuals' mezzo context, that is their households, families and social support networks. The sample size will ideally be of the order of 10,000 or more respondents, who would be interviewed at dates three years apart over a period of nine or more years; however, in instances where resources are severely binding the number of waves may be limited to two. In sum, the GGS will be capable of tracking the changes in families and family relationships as these unfold over a decade or longer.

In line with the multidisciplinary orientation of the Programme, the GGS will collect information on a wide variety of variables, especially those that hold the promise of improving our understanding of the dynamics of the two key family relationships. These explanatory variables will include a number of time-dependent variables. The GGS will place a lesser emphasis than its predecessors on detailed retrospective information, in particular event histories. The variables will include school attendance; employment and

earnings; public allowances and services received by individuals, couples and families; as well as their assets and housing. They will also include information on transfers of money and services within and between generations at the family and network levels. Selected aspects of the relationships between genders, including issues of autonomy and decision-making, will be among the time-varying variables. These variables will also capture subjective dimensions – values, attitudes and beliefs – as well as subjective assessments.

Countries that have rich administrative record data will in some instances opt to draw on these data and complement them with smaller GGS surveys, which will mainly provide information required by the Programme that is unavailable in administrative records. This relatively low-cost approach to collecting GGS data may, however, come at a price, as administrative record data for certain types of variables may not be sufficiently comparable to genuine GGS survey data. Where the lack of sufficient comparability becomes a threat, judicious and possibly difficult choices will have to be made so as to avoid jeopardising data comparability across countries while seeking to contain the cost of data collection. In particular, in countries where administrative record data for certain variables prove not to be sufficiently comparable, these data will not be used and the GGS will become a source of information for those variables.

In addition to the GGS surveys, the Programme will also draw data from a number of existing national and international sources of aggregate-level quantitative and qualitative information. Such data pertain to social and economic conditions, such as the labour and housing markets; to legal provisions, institutions and policies, such as family legislation, benefits and services; and to macro-level gender and intergenerational relationships, as evidenced, for example, by the participation of women in various life domains. The data will relate both to the community level, as defined by countries themselves, as well as to the national level. Macro-level contextual variables at the sub-national and national levels will be used along with GGS data as inputs into multi-level analyses. These variables will be used to try to explain variations in the two principal family relationships within and across countries and over time. It is anticipated that the cross-country comparative studies will shed light on how different welfare regimes influence behaviour, providing indications to policy-makers on how welfare regimes may possibly need to be modified.

How will the GGS research be carried out?

The data will be supplied to and archived at the UNECE headquarters in accordance with legally binding agreements between data-supplying organisations and the UNECE. The data will be distributed on request to individual researchers and groups of researchers at various academic, research and statistical organisations in both countries participating in the Programme and those not taking part in it. They will be used for research purposes only, in compliance with confidentiality pledges to be stipulated in the agreements and signed by researchers filing requests for data. User-friendly but rigorous procedures ensuring confidentiality and integrity of the data will be put into place and adhered to by the UNECE, which will draw on its rich experience with the archiving and disseminating of micro-level data. The data will be forwarded to the UNECE, archived

and then disseminated as soon as they become available so as to avoid delays in the analysis and publishing of findings.

As has been the case with past the UNECE-led international census- and survey-based research efforts, the GGP will stimulate both national and cross-national research. Elements of the GGP research agenda, which have recently been developed, will be further elaborated through dialogue between researchers and policy-makers at the international level. Once the GGP research agenda is completed, it will become a focus for discussions between the two communities at the country level. The purpose will be to ensure that researchers at the various national organisations become sensitive to the needs of policy makers and respond to them, and that, in turn, policy makers at the national and subnational levels become aware of the GGP potential, and to support GGP research and later use the knowledge generated by the Programme. Which particular directions the national-level research will take in the various countries will greatly depend on effective dialogue between these two groups of actors.

It can be expected that the GGP will result in a wealth of scientific papers and reports, some of which will be targeted at the research community, while others will be prepared for policy-makers. There will be follow-up workshops, seminars and conferences, which will bring together researchers, policy-makers and statisticians. Written outputs will be published both by the national organisations and the UNECE. As in the case of the FFS project, international research projects will be promoted and co-ordinated by the PAU so as to make as extensive use as possible of the GGP data for cross-national comparative purposes.

Logistics of the Programme

How is the GGP organised?

After obtaining prior approval from the Conference of European Statisticians, which supervises the Population Activities Unit, the PAU initiated the Programme in early 2000. Toward the middle of 2000, the Unit invited seven prominent national organisations, including population research institutes, university departments and statistical offices, to become members of a GGP Consortium. The GGP Consortium currently consists of the following organisations: the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics (United Kingdom); the Department of Demography, University 'La Sapienza' (Italy); the Hungarian Central Statistical Office; Institut national d'études démographiques (France); the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (Germany); the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute and Statistics Canada. The PAU is both a member and co-ordinator of the Consortium. The Consortium has been the brain of the Programme – it proposed its objective, suggested its framework and made proposals on data sources to develop and use. It has also been its driving force – after having made the proposals, the Consortium is now developing the various GGP instruments.

As the GGP began to mature, a GGP Informal Working Group (IWG) was convened in September 2001. It consists of representatives of the various national institutions from all over the UNECE region plus Japan. Many of them, before the IWG was established, had already met in Geneva in July 2000 to consider and react to the early ideas put forward for the Programme. Subsequently, in their capacity as members of the IWG, the representatives met in Budapest in September 2001. Acting as a consultative body of the Programme, the IWG considered and responded to the Consortium's proposals, broadly endorsing them and making many useful suggestions concerning future GGP work. The IWG members also exchanged views on their respective visions for participating in the Programme. A second meeting of the IWG will take place in early 2003.

As the implementation of the Programme has gained momentum, Small Expert Groups have been formed. One such group has been active in 2001, dealing with various conceptual issues, including defining the GGP goal, research aims and requisite data. Another group, active since the middle of 2001, is developing the GGS questionnaire and survey design. Yet another group is being formed in order to launch the work on macro-level contextual data and variables. It is anticipated that other such groups will be created, enabling the GGP to progressively draw on the expertise of all IWG members as well as researchers not affiliated with the Programme through their institutions.

The IWG has suggested how arrangements be made at the national level so that the GGP begins to move forward in countries wishing to participate in the Programme. The proposal is to form GGP National Committees, consisting of national institutions, in particular research and academic institutions, government ministries or agencies, and national statistical offices. Designated staff of these organisations will form working groups that, under the guidance of the Committees, will implement the Programme at the country level. Leading members of the Committees will represent their respective countries at the IWG. These Committees will do the necessary initial fundraising for the Programme in their countries and they will ensure its long-term financing. The stress that the Committees would comprise institutions rather than individuals participating in their personal capacity is deliberate. It is the IWG's view that only institutions can make the long-term commitment presupposed by the GGP and provide the continuity that is fundamental for the programme's success.

Who will participate in the Programme?

As regards countries, participation in the Programme is open to all UNECE member States, which comprise the countries of Europe and North America, including the Commonwealth of Independent States and Israel. Participation will also be open to countries beyond the borders of the UNECE region, such as those in East and Southeast Asia and Oceania; population and family developments in these countries have much in common with the developments in the UNECE group. Non-UNECE countries would be full and equal partners with the UNECE countries.

As the Programme is still in a relatively early stage, with the various instruments still being developed, no country has yet taken a formal decision to take part in the Programme. Nevertheless, a number have given strong positive indications about their likely participation. Among these countries, where initial steps have already been taken to pave the way for participation in the GGP are: Austria, Canada, France, Hungary, Japan, Romania and Sweden. Hungary has already fielded a first wave of a GGS-type survey, which it hopes to align more closely over time with the future GGS. Representatives of the following countries have also expressed an interest in joining the Programme: Germany, Lithuania, Italy, the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation and Switzerland. The Programme will aim to attract other countries.

How will the GGP forge a link between researchers, statisticians and policy-makers?

The GGP National Committees will provide an institutional framework within which co-operation between researchers, policy-makers and statisticians will take place. Together they will seek how to implement the Programme to the fullest benefit of their country. In particular, the Committees will encourage positive discussions between researchers and policy-makers.

What are the next steps for the GGP?

By the middle of 2003 at the latest, the GGP will conclude the work on several programme instruments which need to be completed before the GGP implementation can start in the various countries. The most important of those instruments are the GGS questionnaire and survey design. These will then require pre-testing in various national settings. The IWG will thoroughly review the instruments and make suggestions regarding their content. At the same time, a drive to fully enlist as many countries as possible to participate in the Programme will be launched and pursued. Moreover, the initial stage of the work on macro-level data and variables, which can be only launched after the GGS survey instruments are well advanced, will take place during this period.

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This report has given an overview of the current status of the far-sighted Generations and Gender Programme. The current phase is exciting and challenging. Considerable work and commitment is needed to bring the hopes and dreams of the participants to fruition. By working together, it can be expected that this international effort will produce useful and fascinating data and knowledge for years to come.