

Conference
How Generations and Gender Shape Demographic Change –
Towards policies based on better knowledge

Opening statement by the UNECE Executive Secretary, Mr. Marek Belka

Wednesday, 14 May 2008 at 11:30 am, Salle XIX

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this conference on how generations and gender shape demographic change. I am pleased to note that it brings together both policy makers and the research community, and that there are some 160 participants: government representatives from 31 countries, researchers from 23 countries, - representatives from 38 different countries in all, many on high level, as well as international organizations and NGOs. This mix is very important and I hope that you will find that the conference format facilitates the dialogue between policymakers and researchers.

Population issues in the UNECE region are **significantly different** from those in other UN regions, including issues such as low fertility and family change, and the UNECE has a long tradition of policy discussions on population issues, including those leading up to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and thereafter. The current Conference is linking to this **tradition**.

The European landscape of international organizations is also different from that of other UN regions. Many organizations deal with different consequences of demographic change and we will hear representatives of some international organizations talk about their work later on in this session. One of UNECE's niches in these activities is in supporting the implementation of the holistic regional strategy on ageing – the only programme that aims at addressing all the policy-relevant aspects of population ageing (many others focus on specific issues more deeply). And indeed recent discussions on population have very often focused on the challenges and opportunities of **population ageing, as evidenced by the recent UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing in León, Spain**.

But there are also other demographic developments that call for policy responses. Most notably, the **low and very low birth rates and changing family structures**. As member States recognized in their Ministerial Declaration in the Conference on Ageing, low birth rates can greatly magnify the challenges posed by population ageing, if they prevail over a long period. Governments therefore proclaimed their commitment to family-friendly policies aimed at the reconciliation of work with family life and with responsibilities for dependent relatives in particular. Such policies can counteract a decrease of the birth rate to very low levels and can augment the employment rate.

Indeed, children and family are commonly associated with a happy and satisfied life. Recent European data suggests that many more people of reproductive age would like to form families and have children than actually do so, and many parents would like to have more children than they have. What role should **public policy** play regarding these issues? Should reconciling work and family life be the main avenue of policy?

In the interplay of changes in intergenerational and gender relationships, several **demographic developments** of recent decades have implications on public policy. These include significant levels of childlessness, increasing age at family formation, increasing prevalence of non-marital partnerships and non-marital childbearing, decreasing stability of co-residential partnerships and the emergence of non-residential partnerships.

In the León Declaration, governments also committed to promote **intergenerational solidarity** as one of the important pillars of social cohesion and of civil society, encouraging initiatives that raise public awareness of the potential of **young** people and of **older** persons and that promote the understanding of ageing and intergenerational solidarity. Societies need to prevent conflicts between generations, in particular between the working and the retired.

What are the best **policy responses** to the demographic trends? Do governments have a toolkit to influence certain demographic trends if they wish to do so? "

The answers to such questions will be discussed in seven thematic **panel sessions**, addressing issues low birth rates, realities of parenthood and childbearing, reconciliation of career and family, better integration of young people, ageing, solidarity within and between generations and gender equality. All sessions will combine contributions from policymakers, who will highlight the specific challenges facing their countries, and scientists, who will present policy-relevant empirical findings based on new data. Time will also be devoted to discussing the implications of the research findings as well as how to translate them into policy strategies more effectively.

I would like to say a few words about data collection and research. All of the meetings that the UNECE has held since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo have emphasized the importance of international cooperation for the implementation of the population and development programmes and of data collection and research in informing policy formulation. Indeed, all of these meetings have also received important inputs from the UNECE cooperation **programmes of data collection and research**. And, indeed, the coordination of such programmes is another niche activity of the UNECE.

The research on demographic developments is crucial because to successfully meet challenges posed by demographic change, policymakers need to be equipped with a **better understanding** of the causes underlying recent developments. Simple identification of demographic trends is not sufficient. Sustainable responses to policy challenges require that the causes and consequences of the demographic developments are understood and explained.

In recognition of this fact, the 2000 International Meeting on Generations and Gender 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).

And here, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for supporting coordination of the Generations and Gender Programme at the UNECE over many years in the past and to the European Commission (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities), which is supporting it at the present time. Both organizations have also significantly supported this currently ongoing conference, for which I would like to thank them warmly.

Implementing and coordinating such a programme requires close cooperation with researchers. The UNECE is grateful to the institutions belonging to the Consortium of the Generations and Gender Programme that have been supporting the development of this programme, in kind through the efforts of their staff in resolving the conceptual and methodological challenges, as well as through providing financial support to the data-collection efforts in several countries.

And finally, no matter how well such a programme is thought through and how good data-collection instruments it provides, it cannot be successful without being actually implemented in member States. I would also like to acknowledge efforts of the 16 countries that have lead the way in implementing this programme and to express hope that the discussions in this conference will lead to an increase in the GGP family of countries.

And, in this connection while it is clear that those who have invested in the relatively demanding data-collection exercise envisaged in the GGP data collection have the advantage in that the presented research findings apply directly to their countries, let me remind you that an important function of this conference is exchange of experiences. With the representation of the broad range of countries with varying demographic situations and policy strategies in this Conference, as well as the different demographic and welfare regimes being represented in the analytical contributions, the coming sessions have an excellent perspective for such exchange

The GGP will be described in detail in a later presentation, but let me just conclude by stating that the concrete results of this programme now ready to be discussed at this meeting with the participation of governments and the expected end-users of the findings. This could have a real impact on policy-making and I therefore hope that your discussions will be fruitful.

Thank you.