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The **7Ds**
for Sustainability

Debt
Decarbonisation
Defence
Democracy

Demography IN DEPTH

De-risking Globalisation
Digitalisation



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

The 7Ds for Sustainability - Demography in Depth

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Introduction

Klaus Welle and Vít Novotný

The European welfare state is being challenged by new realities. People's outlooks on life have changed dramatically over the past decades, including their views on religion, the family and work. The consequences of these societal changes include rising life expectancies and stagnating fertility rates that are insufficient for the natural increase of the population. Humanity's efforts to curtail overpopulation and increase longevity have caused the ageing of our societies, a trend that has been under way for decades.

Our institutions and policies are not ready for these developments. National social security systems lack sustainable funding. Labour market rules are lagging behind the needs of the ageing societies, and these rules do not capitalise on the experience that older workers can bring in. In general, pronatalist policies in the form of cash transfers to young families have not fulfilled their objective. The EU's population has been growing only thanks to immigration from outside the bloc, but family reunification—the most frequent type of EU-bound immigration—has not improved the ratios of workers to non-workers. In Southern and Eastern Europe and in many regions elsewhere on the continent, depopulation and emigration are compounding the problems caused by ageing. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to a worsening of mental health. This has impacted young people with particular severity, keeping them out of schools and jobs.

To mitigate the effects of population ageing and the other phenomena mentioned, it is incumbent on the EU's national governments to create institutional environments that increase human capital and make it easier for women and men to both pursue a career and raise a family. As for the numbers of children born, the fact that fertility rates in some EU countries are higher than in others suggests the crucial importance of national social policies. It used to be assumed that a woman who 'stays at home' is more likely to have children than a woman who 'pursues a career.' Contrary to that outdated notion, it now appears that having a stable job allows those who wish to have children to choose to do so.

Health care, affordable housing and life-long learning have become crucial for maintaining the well-being of the population and a productive labour force. The participation of women, older people, young people and immigrant groups in the labour market must be increased. State pension age should be increased albeit with elements of flexibility to allow for individual choice. Finally, innovative solutions are needed to address both depopulation in some countries and areas and the growing regional imbalances within the EU.

In 2023, the Martens Centre published its *7Ds for Sustainability* strategy document. This text comprised 175 proposals for the next legislature to future-proof EU policy in the areas of debt, decarbonisation, defence, democracy, demography, de-risking globalisation, and digitalisation. Sustainability was chosen as the guiding principle to ensure that the policies reconcile the needs of both the present and the future, and systematically include the interests of the next generations.

The *7Ds* document has already inspired reflection on what to do over the next five years, the discussions being based on Christian Democrat and conservative thinking and the available in-house expertise of the Martens Centre. For the next phase of intense discussions about the programme to be implemented during the 2024–9 legislature, the Martens Centre has invited renowned external experts to put forward their own, more extensive proposals based on the original document, thereby deepening the available expertise. It is hoped that these proposals, published at the beginning of April 2024, will help to clarify the way forward at a critical juncture, when the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council are negotiating on and finalising their strategic priorities.

Forging a Productive and Child-Friendly Society

Daniela Vono de Vilhena

To forge productive and child-friendly societies, steps need to be taken to ensure that young people have stable and independent lives at an early age. Governments should provide public services and infrastructure that help the working age population to thrive; and authorities should invest in human capital from pre-school age onwards.

First, in recent decades the transition to adulthood has been taking substantially longer in many European countries. It is crucial to ensure that this transition takes place effectively, not only to increase the number of people in the labour force, which is vital in ageing societies, but also to improve individual well-being and to allow those who wish to have children to have sufficient time and financial stability to pursue this goal.

Second, the appropriate public services and infrastructure are necessary for the working-age population to thrive. Here, promoting gender equality is essential. It is well known that girls outperform boys in school and that, among the younger generations, women outnumber men in tertiary education. However, women's educational attainment does not translate into equal employment opportunities and working conditions, especially when they become mothers. To address this issue, regulations to guarantee gender equality in the workplace are necessary. It is also important to promote work-life balance, the use of parental leave by fathers and greater involvement of men in care and family life. In addition, to ensure that families have adequate, stable incomes, governments need to provide universal child benefits and to increase financial support. And to promote the well-being and productivity of the whole population, investment in health care needs to be increased and access to housing has to be improved.

Finally, what happens early in life has a direct impact on how individuals perform in adulthood, and school performance is a strong determinant of individuals' future working lives. Accordingly, to ensure a productive and child-friendly society in the long term, it is necessary to increase and improve investment in human capital. Three areas deserve particular attention. (1) There is ample evidence of the importance of high-quality preschool education for a child's development, yet in Europe the infrastructure is often inadequate, and there are problems with access to and the quality of services. (2) Early school leaving is a real problem, as is the number of young people who are not in school, employment or training. Education systems need to become more equitable and effective. Supporting under-resourced pupils and disadvantaged schools, raising the minimum age for leaving school, and promoting social and emotional learning in school are solid steps in this direction. (3) The levels of achievement of children from lower social backgrounds could be improved substantially by reducing the long school holidays and ensuring that educational activities are carried out within school hours.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Ensuring young people have a stable, productive and independent life at an early age	Providing public services and infrastructure for the working-age population to thrive	Increasing and improving human capital investment in children and adolescents
Project 1	Create stable and sustainable policies and subsidies to promote residential independence among young people.	Ensure that childbearing does not penalise women in the labour market. To this end, regulations are needed that promote work–life balance, the use of parental leave by fathers and the greater involvement of men in care and family life.	Increase the supply of and facilitate access to high-quality preschool education. This can be done by, e.g. incentivising companies to build nurseries; increasing the number of hours children are allowed to attend formal childcare; and ensuring an adequate number of teachers, up-to-date pedagogical practices and appropriate age-specific settings.
Project 2	Incentivise companies to attract more young people by offering attractive salaries, flexible working conditions and work–life balance.	Expand universal child benefits and additional financial support to ensure adequate family income.	Disparities in school performance at the primary and secondary levels should be tackled by supporting under-resourced pupils and disadvantaged schools. Raise the minimum age for leaving school to when pupils earn a secondary degree. Moreover, social and emotional learning should also be promoted.
Project 3	Encourage hybrid and flexible forms of employment and entrepreneurship without compromising on job stability and security.	Invest in health care and access to housing to ensure the well-being and productivity of the population.	Design policies that do not penalise under-resourced pupils and at the same time allow mothers to pursue full-time work. This includes insisting on full-time schooling, offering affordable school meals, providing help with homework, organising extra-curricular activities within school hours and reducing the length of school holidays.

Increasing the Labour Participation of Women

Anna Matysiak and Anna Kurowska

Although the education levels of European women are higher than those of men, their participation in the labour force remains lower. Women work part-time more often, earn lower wages and are under-represented in managerial positions. Additionally, women often outnumber men in lower-paid occupations. This disparity in labour market participation poses multiple challenges. Women's potential, including their human capital and creativity, is not fully used, which impedes the economic and social advancement of European societies. This is particularly problematic given the rapid ageing of European populations, which is leading to labour shortages and fiscal pressures. Furthermore, as a consequence of their lower participation in the labour market, women receive lower pensions and are at higher risk of poverty when they become older. It is thus crucial to actively foster women's economic activity and address gender disparities within the labour market. Comprehensive policy interventions are needed.

First, the unequal division of unpaid work, particularly caregiving, limits women's ability to participate fully in paid employment. Redistributing care responsibilities among parents, the welfare state and employers is essential. Care should no longer fall solely to women but be shared equally between women and men. Additionally, the support of the state and employers is needed. Policies should not only encourage fathers' involvement in childcare but also promote men's participation in care over the entire life course, including elderly care. European states must ensure access to full-time, affordable and flexible childcare and elderly care. Moreover, employers should facilitate work-life balance by offering employee-oriented flexible working arrangements on equal terms with standard work arrangements. Both the state and employers must guarantee equal access to care-related leave, including equal compensation, for both women and men.

Second, increasing the participation of women in the labour force requires equal career opportunities for women and men. To this end it is pivotal to reduce gender segregation in occupations, particularly by encouraging women's entry into science and technology and men's uptake of traditionally female-dominated jobs. Such actions should diminish gender differences in pay gaps in the long run. Furthermore, efforts are needed to ensure equal pay for women and men in equivalent positions and to increase the representation of women in management. Such measures will not only improve women's career prospects but also create a more inclusive organisational culture and enhance productivity through higher diversity.

Third, increasing women's participation in the labour market requires investment in their human capital, including skills and physical and mental health. Adapting work environments to women's health needs is crucial to maintaining higher productivity and preventing workforce withdrawal. Such actions should extend beyond pregnancy and maternity, encompassing a comprehensive understanding of women's health needs at various life stages, including menstruation and menopause. Furthermore, workplaces should support employees' access to medical services and offer periodic high-quality health evaluations. Finally, skill enhancement programmes are needed that are tailored to women in mid-career stages, given women's susceptibility to skill depreciation due to care-related career breaks and their higher prevalence in positions exposed to automation.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Redistributing care responsibilities between parents, the welfare state and employers	Fostering gender equality in professional careers and pay	Making it easier for women to remain active in the labour market longer
Project 1	Foster men's involvement in areas such as child and elderly care by ensuring that both men and women have access to care-related leave with equal compensation and by promoting men's participation in care through social campaigns.	Reduce gender segregation in occupations, particularly by encouraging women's entry into science and technology and men's uptake of traditionally female-dominated jobs.	Adapt work conditions to women's health needs at various life stages, extending the focus beyond periods of pregnancy and early childbearing to include menstruation and menopause.
Project 2	Develop full-time, flexible, high-quality and affordable child and elderly care.	Increase the share of women in managerial positions by ensuring that promotion processes are transparent and that working conditions in such positions are conducive to achieving a work-life balance.	Facilitate access to preventive health care through workplace environments.
Project 3	Incentivise employers to create conditions that facilitate work-family balance and ensure equal treatment of those working flexibly with those in standard working arrangements.	Guarantee equal pay for women and men in equivalent positions by ensuring that pay practices are transparent in all EU member states.	Develop skill enhancement programmes tailored to women in the middle stages of their careers, enabling them to adapt to rapid technological changes in the labour market.

Boosting the Participation of Both Young and Older People

Arnstein Aassve

Populations in Europe are ageing because, combined with low fertility, individuals are living longer, healthier lives. Our systems need to adapt to facilitate longer working lives, increase labour force participation and improve people's digital skills.

Apart from the unpopular but necessary step of raising the retirement age, one strategy to deal with the challenges of ageing is to develop flexible retirement schemes. This means maintaining a statutory retirement age, at which individuals are entitled to retire if they so choose, while also introducing flexibility for those who wish to work longer. Those who have physically and mentally demanding jobs may wish to retire at the guaranteed retirement age, while others may be equipped and motivated to work for several more years. In addition, the current educational system predominantly focuses on the education of the young, aiming to prepare them for a profession or occupation where they can contribute to the productivity and economic prosperity of the nation state. However, with rapid technological changes, as evidenced by the onset of artificial intelligence, labour markets are transforming quickly. This requires the modernisation of education, including as a means to encourage people to work longer.

Increasing labour force participation through education and training is another imperative. The ageing of the population will lead to a significant increase in the number of people entering retirement. Consequently, there is a need to expand the caring workforce, which entails improving the educational infrastructure for these professionals. However, many individuals, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, are excluded from this field, often because their training in their original country is not identical to what is required in the EU. There is an important need to make it easier for the immigrant population to participate in this growing profession; the standardisation and harmonisation of such training schemes would help. There are also variations across the educational systems among the EU member states. Some are oriented towards fostering less individual competition (e.g. Finland), while others take a more elitist approach (e.g. Italy). The phenomenon of school dropouts is more prevalent in countries with elitist educational systems. However, in ageing society, it is crucial to prevent young people's exclusion from education, employment and training.

Finally, with the ever-increasing pace of technological change, digital channels have become the standard way for people to interact with banking, the public sector and private services. Our educational systems need revising to integrate digital technologies into schools alongside more traditional subjects. It is equally true that the actors involved in the process of digitisation have not prioritised user-friendliness. In the public sector, bureaucratic regulations impose overly complicated procedures that older citizens—who were not exposed to digital technology during their own education—struggle to navigate. There are stark differences across European countries. For example, the UK has made commendable efforts to make digital access easier.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Facilitating longer working lives	Increasing labour force participation through education and training	Investing in the digitalisation of public services
Project 1	Increase the state pension age. In Norway, for example, there is a general consensus to increase the retirement age to 72, albeit with important elements of flexibility.	Expand and facilitate training in care-related occupations, in particular for those with immigrant backgrounds. EU institutions could play a role in establishing educational or training standards that would lead to an EU certification. This would help to open up access to professions that in some cases are overprotected by national regulations.	Expand training and education to improve citizens' digital competences and their preparedness for the digital age.
Project 2	Develop flexible retirement schemes. Offer a choice not only of the number of additional years worked but also as to whether those years are taken as part-time work. Such a system may require collaboration between the private sector and the state.	Reform educational systems to address youth unemployment and to reduce the share of young people who leave school without basic skills. This means changing longstanding school systems, thereby making education more inclusive.	Simplify digital services in the public sector and make them more accessible and user-friendly, particularly for older people. Older people should not be dependent on younger family members for assistance.
Project 3	Expand schooling and retraining for the older age strata of the population. Universities should enable individuals in their 40s, 50s and 60s to re-enter education and gain new qualifications, so as to ensure longer and meaningful working lives.	Reform education to respond to the technological developments that are leading to jobs, professions and occupations changing or disappearing. The modern educational system needs to provide opportunities both to upgrade one's education and to retrain, as opposed to ending up inactive and becoming dependent upon state welfare benefits or family support.	Expand and develop existing training facilities to improve the digital competences of the older generations.

Leveraging the Potential of Migrants and Diasporas

Rainer Münz

Europe is facing a demographically induced shortage of labour and skills. This demographic and labour deficit can be addressed by (1) a substantial rise in the retirement age (ideally by linking it to increasing life expectancy, as in Finland and Sweden); (2) higher labour force participation among migrants from non-EU countries in general and female migrants in particular; and (3) the admission of foreign labour and skills.

‘Importing’ foreign labour is the quickest ‘remedy’ if these migrants expediently integrate into European labour markets. It is also important to activate the segments of European society that have low labour force participation rates. While 75% of EU-born people are working, less than two-thirds of non-EU-born residents are employed. The gap is particularly visible among women: only 50% of non-EU-born women residing in the EU are in work, compared to 75% of women born in the bloc. And despite skills shortages in the EU27, more than a third of all working migrants are employed below their skill level (resulting in brain waste).

There are various reasons for these unsatisfactory economic and labour market outcomes and several ways to address them. First, during the past 15 years, inflows of non-EU citizens have been dominated by asylum seekers, displaced Ukrainians, dependent family members and marriage migrants. None was selected based on his or her education or skills. Consequently, many migrants arriving via these pathways do not match EU labour market needs. EU countries therefore need to develop migration policies that use employability as a key criterion for admission. This could include a requirement for pre-departure enrolment in language classes or targeted upskilling for marriage and family migrants.

Second, some problems are ‘homemade’. Recognition of skills acquired outside the EU is often cumbersome and inefficient, which contributes to brain waste. The vested interests of natives partly prevent immigrants from competing with them, leading to discrimination. To stay competitive in times of an ageing and declining native workforce, EU countries need to remain or become attractive destinations and to speed up the economic integration of newly arriving migrants. The European Commission should establish a global register for educational attainment and skills equivalency, as well as EU-wide guidelines for skills assessments to support employers and labour market authorities.

Third, low labour force participation among women from certain diasporas is partly the result of the cultural values of their countries of origin, where there is little or no tradition of mothers working in the formal sector of the economy. Targeted measures directed at the female members of these diasporas (i.e. improving literacy and numeracy, skills transferability, language support and health measures), in combination with an expansion of preschool facilities and after-school care (possibly with language training and homework support), have the potential to foster the socio-economic integration of these women—especially those with children.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Developing a better migration policy	Speeding up the economic integration of migrants and diaspora members	Supporting the integration of people with migrant and diaspora backgrounds, in particular women
Project 1	Develop admission criteria which have a clear focus on employability.	Improve mechanisms for the recognition of non-EU qualifications, including those of Ukrainian refugees.	Increase efforts to integrate immigrants, including by insistence on language learning.
Project 2	Require pre-departure integration efforts such as language training and skills documentation.	Develop anti-discrimination measures.	Upskill immigrants and diaspora members with low levels of education and work experience.
Project 3	Provide intensive language training and targeted onboarding for migrants admitted for their labour and skills.	Establish a global register for educational attainment and skills equivalency, applicable in all EU countries.	Expand preschool facilities and after-school care for children (including support for language training and homework).

Addressing Depopulation

Tado Jurić

Current migration trends and population distribution in the EU are exacerbating both existing inequalities between Eastern and Western Europe and the economic gap between developed and poorer regions.

Patterns of internal EU migration from the periphery to the core mainly involve young, educated and skilled workers, and families often migrate together. This process produces a 'geography of discontent' effect in the countries of departure, encouraging further emigration. The sharp decline in the number of inhabitants is pronounced in the Baltic States and Greece but is most dramatic in Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. It is important to note that this depopulation is not primarily linked to natural decline but to massive emigration. The policy of drawing a young workforce to the centre of the EU, coupled with corruption in the countries of emigration, is one of the main causes of contemporary migrations from the EU periphery. Alongside this, Spain, France and other EU countries have been experiencing outflows of people from their rural regions due to a lack of infrastructure and services and declining incomes.

For these reasons all EU member states and institutions should work to mitigate the harmful effects of freedom of movement and unfavourable demographic developments in general. Sending and hosting countries and regions should work together. The proposed measures respond to the following problems and policy gaps:

Demographic measures and policy coordination. An EU-level office should be established, tasked with exchanging best practices among the relevant national demographic policy bodies of the EU member states. Generational solidarity could bridge the gap between urban and rural regions, create youth employment and foster a sense of belonging in depopulated areas. Amendments to inheritance laws would have a direct impact on the depopulated regions (because in these regions most property ownership is still in the hands of families).

Labour markets and demographic data. EU countries in the South and East are experiencing outflows of qualified personnel, especially in health care. This also raises the question of the investment in the education of the emigrated workforce. Migrations are extremely difficult to record correctly. This is evidenced by the discrepancies between the records of Eurostat and the national statistical offices, which show variances of between 20% and 80% over the last decade. This is not just an administrative issue: insufficient records result in various abuses of social and other systems. Therefore, we propose a new (supplementary) approach based on digital traces and Big Data.

Revitalising the periphery. Developed regions have always attracted young people, and the phenomenon of 'escaping from the province' is an important push factor for youth emigration. Empty areas are susceptible to environmental degradation and illegal migration. However, in the future the peripheral areas could appear more attractive due to various threats, such as pandemics, pollution and terrorism. Remote work could repopulate the periphery of the EU. The prerequisite for this is providing the rural regions with broadband Internet, public transport, mobile health care teams and distance education.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Developing demographic measures and coordinating policy	Enhancing labour markets and utilising demographic data	Revitalising the periphery
Project 1	Use inheritance as a demographic measure: amending inheritance laws to allow direct inheritance from grandparents to grandchildren would result in competition between sons and daughters to have more children (the first generation is typically around 48 years old when inheriting, while grandchildren are around 18, precisely when they need encouragement).	Provide financial support to centres of excellence for the education of those in deficit occupations (such as nursing) in Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, with the condition that, after their education, the beneficiaries stay and work in their home country for five years.	Allow workers to relocate to the periphery and work remotely (with the obligation to come into the office once every two weeks). Remote work could repopulate and revitalise rural areas, reduce brain drain and encourage people (the diaspora) to return.
Project 2	Establish an EU-level office tasked with exchanging best practices among the relevant national demographic policy bodies.	Combat corruption and clientelism in Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania as these are two of the factors underlying emigration. Set up a website where the results of all public tenders (local and national), including stakeholders and amounts, are transparently listed.	Improve infrastructure by (1) installing broadband Internet throughout the EU, (2) investing in public transportation, (3) introducing mobile health care teams and (4) providing distance education options.
Project 3	Connect the young and the old through financial vouchers tied to each elderly person, which he or she can allocate to those providing assistance with basic tasks, such as shopping and transport.	Develop a new approach to monitoring migration, one that uses Big (Crisis) Data to track digital traces of migration. The aim is to enhance the collection of demographic data and accurately assess the scale of the demographic challenges in individual EU regions.	Determine which areas have serious and persistent demographic challenges and allocate to them funds from cohesion policies. Special support should be provided to areas with a population density of less than 12.5 inhabitants per km ² or with an average annual population decrease of greater than 1%.

About the Authors



Arnstein Aassve is a Professor at Bocconi University. Having previously received two European Research Council grants, he is currently leading the Horizon Europe project, FutuRes: Towards a Resilient Future of Europe, which focuses on education, employment and health in an era of ageing. His publications span political science, sociology, economics, demography, econometrics, and global and public health, and include several reports targeting both policymakers and the public. Topics covered in these reports range from institutional trust and the Covid pandemic to youth issues.



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