Parliamentarians and the Road to Demographic Resilience

A toolkit for effective, far-sighted population policy

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Short Description

The following toolkit was created to introduce MPs, their staff, and those working with parliaments to "Demographic Resilience", a framework for responding to ongoing changes with human capital investments and social system adaptations.

This toolkit covers the principles of Demographic Resilience, the role of MPs in demographic policy-making, and how a resilience approach looks for three fundamental pillars of any population policy (families, youth, and seniors). It is meant to pose thought-provoking questions, help set realistic expectations for policy interventions, and spark greater interest in these topics for further investigation. While the toolkit primarily uses examples from Europe and Central Asia, the guiding principles and global nature of many demographic changes ensures the lessons remain applicable far beyond the immediate region.

Introducing the Demographic Resilience Toolkit for Parliamentarians

A typical piece of legislation represents hundreds, if not thousands, of work hours invested. To arrive at the final product involves a complex series of inputs, including consultations, negotiations, and reformulations. At the end of the process, legislative acts rarely have straightforward, one-dimensional impacts. Individual demographic trends share these traits in the sense that they have their origins in countless factors, and often come with a series of implications well beyond what is immediately apparent on the surface.

It has become increasingly clear that **parliamentarians have a duty to prepare for shifting demographics**, a UN-identified 'global megatrend' reshaping our world[1]. Most prominent among the complex trends is population aging. All countries of the world can expect to become more mature, with higher average ages and more seniors over 65 years. The extension of lifespans is a remarkable and historic achievement. The sustainability of social support systems, among other things, depends on how well public policy can empower people to remain healthy and active – realizing their full potential – at all ages.

Besides population aging, various other policy challenges arise from either population growth or decline, people having more or fewer children, and whether or not they migrate. These trends each bring their own set of disruptions for housing, incomes, education, health care, natural resources, ecology, social cohesion, religion, culture, and many other factors that define quality of life and resilience of a nation. While the likely extent, speed, and even direction of future changes is difficult to pinpoint, the sheer momentum behind many of the trends suggests that parliamentarians must ask: **which demographic trends can be influenced by policy interventions? (and which should be answered with adaptation strategies?)**

Many of the trends in motion are inevitable by products of socio-economic development. Similarly, they cannot be removed from the larger context of improving technology, economic growth, human capital, and other factors when judging the potential impact. **Among the most feared consequences of demographic change, some are well-justified, while others are often**

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[1] https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/10/20-124-UNEN-75Report-ExecSumm-EN-REVISED.pdf

misunderstood or exaggerated. See the toolkit Annex for a brief 'crash course' on basic demographic concepts and common misconceptions.

Figure 1: Feared Impacts of Demographic Change in Popular Discourse[2]
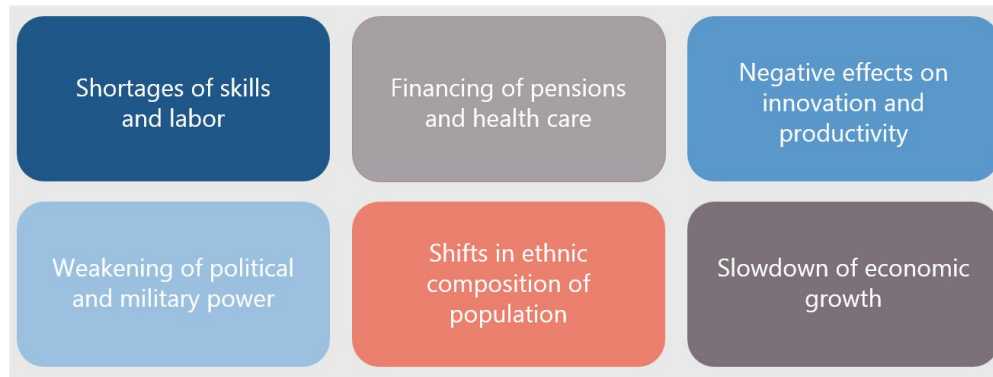
Whether or not these potential impacts of demographic change become reality depends in large part on how well nations can understand the root causes of population trends and forge successful policy responses. The overall goal is to create societies that are resilient to, and can thrive amid, unfolding demographic changes to achieve broad future prosperity.

| Scope & Objectives |

The collection of nations in focus – those throughout Europe and Central Asia – offer a wealth of insights and policy experiences as a microcosm of global diversity in demographic trends. Similarly, the parliaments differ in their structures, mandates, and per capita representation. For example, the average Member of the EU parliament is tasked with representing some of the largest number of citizens by global standards, at nearly 600,000. The equivalent number for MPs in small-sized countries is often 20,000 or fewer. Despite these vastly different constituencies involved, parliamentarians all serve the function of responding to societal challenges, translating ideas into workable laws.

It is essential that legislative energy can be channeled towards demographic preparedness for broad future prosperity. To this end, the toolkit aims to demystify the process: going from

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identifying demographic challenges, to reaching a policy solution. It is not prescriptive or partisan, instead **the toolkit lays out a universal guide for navigating demographic changes**, meant to be useful wherever a country is in its development path**.** In scope, the toolkit covers both questions of process and substance.

Section 2: The Four Principles of Demographic Resilience

An informed, systematic approach to policy-making benefits the end result. When it comes to demographic trends it is essential to first clarify – what exactly are the problems?; and how can they be solved through acts of parliament?

A framework can help answer these questions and design smart legislation in response. As a concept pioneered by UNFPA, Demographic Resilience[3] lays out the basic ingredients for effective and far-sighted demographic policy-making. The framework consists of the following four principles:

1. **Evidence-based Policy** | The decision-making process must incorporate high quality data and analysis, the foundation for any accurate view of the past, present, and future. Without this, policy-makers are essentially lost at sea without a way to establish the current position or a direction forward.

2. **Human Capital** | Adaptive capacity is inseparably tied to human capital, the collective abilities of a nation's people. The scale and depth of the demographic challenges are pressing insofar as they coincide with gaps in human capital.

3. **Systems Reform** | Unfolding demographic trends require systematic recognition and an integrated policy action response. Anticipating the challenges of tomorrow is essential for the sustainability of social systems, services, and infrastructure.

4. **Public Support** | From the beginning, it is essential to identify what can and cannot be plausibly changed. Many demographic policies are doomed to fail, if for no other reason than

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[3] https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2024-10/224_DemRes%20Brochure_2024%20Update_Print_r1.pdf

> the expectations for judging their success do not correspond to reality. Discourse should be constructive, emphasizing opportunities over threats.

The need for such a framework emerged from the International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, when 179 governments gathered to chart a new path forward for population policy. The landmark conference concluded with a collective recognition of the need for a human-centered approach, based on sustainable development, empowering women and girls, and removing barriers to reproductive aspirations of men and women.[4] In practice, this meant moving away from explicit demographic targets, in favor of freedom of choice and meeting people where they are in terms of needs and desires.

More recently, the ambitious and influential Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have driven national and international dialogue on how to pursue development policy. Many of the calls to action heavily intersect with demographic questions, such as those related to health, education, and inequalities. The SDGs even explicitly address parliamentary matters in the context of increasing women's participation in decision making positions, among larger concerns for well-being that extend to legal frameworks for protection against violence, forced marriage, and other harms and securing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In 2024, another high-profile affirmation of this broad vision took the form of the Pact for the Future during the Summit of the Future, with the added reality check that almost all the SDGs remain "severely off track" for 2030. In spite of the situation, the Summit rejected pessimistic narratives and inaction. It reinforced calls for intergenerational solidarity and ensuring that youth are provided opportunities for education, jobs, community engagement, and political leadership[5]. Such calls for human capital development are not only in the interest of youth, but the older generations that rely on them to build and maintain a resilient society.

Overall, The framework challenges common assumptions that the demographic trends themselves need to be altered, in line with international development declarations and initiatives.

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[5] https://ourfutureagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Summit-of-the-Future-Brief-Demographics-Jul24.pdf

It also manages expectations of what is possible and is **focused on human well-being as an end goal, rather than maintaining an arbitrary population size or structure**. Simplistic demographic indicators alone can offer a false promise of stability or sense of meaning if not seen in their larger context. Is is important to not miss what truly defines a nation's strengths and weaknesses. Achieving resilience – Demographic Resilience – is **primarily about equipping a population with the tools needed for navigating ongoing changes**.

Section 3: Why are MPs so vital for demographic matters?

The nature of demographic change is big picture, and often long-term, requiring comprehensive policy solutions and national-level leadership. Together with the executive branch, this falls firmly within the role and mandate of MPs. Specifically, **MPs are tasked with at least four core responsibilities** relevant for achieving Demographic Resilience:

1. Producing Acts of Legislation
2. Monitoring Policy Implementation
3. Budgetary Allocation
4. Dialogue with Constituents

Acts of legislation require creativity, expert support networks, and individual MPs who champion ideas throughout the process. While any policy issue can benefit from a rigorous legislative process and an unbroken 'custodianship' of bills by MPs, it is particularly true for demographic changes, which often require cross-sectoral planning for the overall strategy. Box 1 highlights a couple of country examples, where structures have been put in place to formalize know-how in support of, and commitments to, demographic policy-making.

Box 1: Demographic Legislation & Policy Practices

Albania: The "All Party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development" is made up of MPs that come from various parliamentary commissions, with the purpose of providing a dedicated non-partisan space for dialogue on policy responses to population

trends. Creating a formal structure has helped ensure that institutional demographic knowledge sustains itself. It also has encouraged MPs to amend or initiate draft legislation based on data (i.e. the 2023 Population and Housing Census) and expert analysis, shaping the wider parliamentary activities concerning demographic trends.

Once laws have passed, parliamentarians must guarantee their implementation. Oversight introduces accountability for the relevant authorities (local, regional, and national) to live up to the spirit of the laws enacted, and requires incentives for reporting to reflect public concerns. Box 2 highlights an example of a parliament that has monitoring systems in place to verify that the demographic policy on paper becomes a reality. A concern in many nations is inconsistent implementation, where laws may be enforced inconsistently or not at all, even though they are passed. Such altered implementation, rather than going through the legislative process, is particularly vulnerable to election cycles and changes in government. In the OECD countries, an insufficient 'culture of evaluation' is identified as the most common challenge to policy evaluation, followed by lack of dedicated resources for such activities.[6]

Box 2: Monitoring Demographic Policy Implementation

Finland: The "Parliamentary Working Group on Sparsely Populated Areas" was founded to support improved living conditions and opportunities in rural areas, during the period 2023-2027.[7] The scope of the group's activities include monitoring a range of necessary adaptation actions in territories with a shrinking population. Importantly, this also covers monitoring progress of initiatives pursued by a previous version of the parliamentary working group (active from 2020-2023), which demonstrates a rare continuity amid change in governments and essential follow-up for effective long-term policy efforts.

Even the best legislative ideas can be made powerless without the necessary budget. Ongoing demographic shifts make a just distribution of resources between generations and across regions all the more difficult, with routine adjustments necessary. Budgetary allocations require data on

[6] https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/public-policy-monitoring-and-evaluation.html
[7] https://mmm.fi/en/rural-policy/parliamentary-working-group-on-sparsely-populated-areas

current and projected demographic profiles of beneficiaries. Box 3 shows how countries are integrating demographic knowledge and foresight into the budgetary process.

Box 3: Budgetary Practices & Demographic Policy

Moldova: As of 2024, the law requires official population projections to be produced for the purpose of serving planning efforts of the central and local public administration authorities. Specifically, the projections require regular updates and are intended for integration into the process of program development and budgeting. Parliamentarians assigned responsibility for such activities to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

Uzbekistan: A special "Population Day" workshop was organized in Uzbekistan's legislative chamber (Oliy Majlis) to showcase data available for parliamentarians to use – including for the optimal allocation of state resources to social programs, infrastructure planning, and economic development strategies. Links were drawn between demographic trends (population projections) and the future process of setting budgets for essential services such as schools, public transportation, energy generation, etc.

Dialogue with constituents is not only a legal obligation in many cases, but it is fundamental to being able to represent their voices. Without this necessary test, even the most well-intentioned initiatives may fail to capture what really matters, the key concerns or hardships facing citizens. It also builds trust and legitimacy with the stakeholders through transparency. The very personal nature of 'demographic' decisions of marriage, when to start families, healthy lifestyles, migration intentions, etc. mean that seeking the input of the public is invaluable. Box 4 describes a couple of cases where MPs have promoted active dialogue with the public on demographic policies.

Box 4: Parliament Dialogue with the Public on Demographic Policy

Armenia: Dedication to stakeholder engagement has been demonstrated throughout the development of the national Demographic Strategy of Armenia. Collective ownership of the Strategy was pursued through a structured, three-phase dialogue process: policy

development, feedback collection on the final version, and communication following its adoption. The systematic consultation of stakeholders covered extensive intra-governmental exchange, as well as dialogue with businesses and labor unions, demographic-focused NGOs, universities, and academic institutions.

Section 4: Demographic Modules

In the parliamentary setting, a critical mass of MPs is needed for a living, dynamic, and effective policy-making process for a given issue. Championing demographic legislation requires asking key questions about their nation's existing laws and identifying potential needs for interventions. To those ends, the following section focuses on pressing themes for Demographic Resilience as they relate to the work of parliamentarians. It is structured to be relevant to nations throughout Europe and Central Asia, in their large diversity of current and projected challenges.

For each theme, the self-assessment questions below are meant to establish the status quo, including topics of substance, organization, and process. The answers equip parliamentarians with a critical lens through which they can view demographic policy.

Questions for Reflection (repeat for each module):

1. **Assessing whether current policy is in line with the Demographic Resilience framework[8]…**

   a. Do existing policies reflect the principle of being data- and evidence-based?

   b. Do existing policies reflect public support and constructive dialogue?

   c. Do existing policies reflect a prioritization of human capital development and well-being?

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[8] https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2024-10/224_DemRes%20Brochure_2024%20Update_Print_r1.pdf

d. Do existing policies reflect a built-in recognition of demographic trends, and corresponding adaptive mechanisms?

2. **In parallel to identifying the need for legislative changes, the larger network of support requires attention…**

   a. What kind of parliamentary groups exist and can be consulted on the demographic theme in question? (If none exist, can they be established?)

   b. How can financing be secured for parliamentary groups (either internal or partnering with research centers) to ensure continuity and institutional know-how, especially over election cycles?

3. **From policy inception to monitoring, communication with stakeholders and beneficiaries remains essential…**

   a. Is the vision for demographic policies coordinated with the executive branch and all relevant ministries?

   b. Are sub-national units of government actively involved to incentivize the design of actionable and practical legislation?

   c. Has the public (citizens, community groups, private sector, CSOs, etc.) been consulted throughout the process to check policy is responsive to actual needs (root causes)?

1) Expanding Choices for Families

The global decline in fertility rates of recent years has grabbed international headlines, prompting calls for policy-makers to take action. In crafting a smart response, it is valuable for MPs to understand 1) that this is a relatively predictable (and natural) process that comes with modernization and 2) a smaller cohort of children is an opportunity to invest more in their human capital (see 1st Demographic Dividend in the Appendix). These perspectives help to set realistic expectations for policy interventions.

Family formation is subject to concerns from economics, social norms, and biological limits, all of which interplay with each other. In particular, all that is on the shoulders of mothers and fathers makes it difficult to balance work responsibilities with family care and other domestic obligations, burdens that fall disproportionately on mothers.[9]

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[9] https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/j0327_unfpa_ffw_model_v7.pdf

The Demographic Resilience framework puts the topic of fertility primarily in terms of supporting would-be parents to achieve their intentions and realize their rights. It encourages a degree of acceptance of the trends because the main goal is to provide conditions for people to thrive, rather than achieve allusive or arbitrary demographic targets. Still, low fertility is a 'problem' insofar as it is an expression of lack of resources and unfulfilled desires. With Demographic Resilience in mind, MPs can work to empower their citizens with the means to overcome hurdles to parenthood, thereby expanding their range of choices and opportunities.

Key Observation: Sizable gaps between desired and realized fertility exist. For many highly developed countries, including those in Europe, actual fertility is consistently lower by a significant margin. The most extreme desired-to-actual fertility gaps are observed among university-educated women, who often have at least a child fewer than they wished. Such gaps arise during what has been called the 'rush hour of life', when women face many competing priorities and life goals during their reproductive years.[10]

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*Figure X: People across Europe want more children than they end up having*
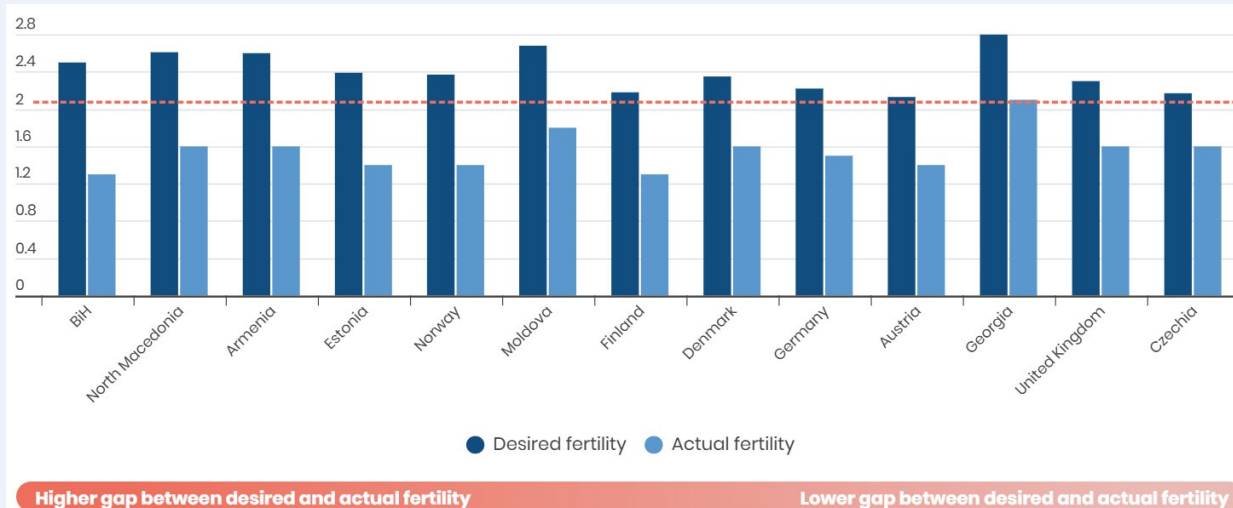
10 https://research.wu.ac.at/ws/portalfiles/portal/19832668/040_Testa.pdf

| Economic Concerns |

How affordable are families?

Local economic conditions, and their perceived stability, clearly play a role in decisions to start families.[11] [12] This is especially true in a world where parenting is increasingly about more resource-intensive investments in fewer children. While general economic conditions (and economic downturns) are subject to many forces, MPs can put in place a series of measures to protect families against acute financial strains. Figure X shows a range of popular family policies that are often implemented as part of a package of benefits. Such efforts help mothers and fathers **alleviate burdens by subsidizing specific needs (especially home ownership and childcare)**, as well as offering one-time or ongoing general financial support (baby bonus, tax credits, etc.). In the spirit of expanding choices, **maternal leave benefits are done best when they are linked to income** (as in the majority of EU countries[13]) rather than a flat sum, so that the support remains equally attractive for all potential mothers.

Figure X: Popular interventions in countries with family-friendly policies (%), 2015-2019[14]
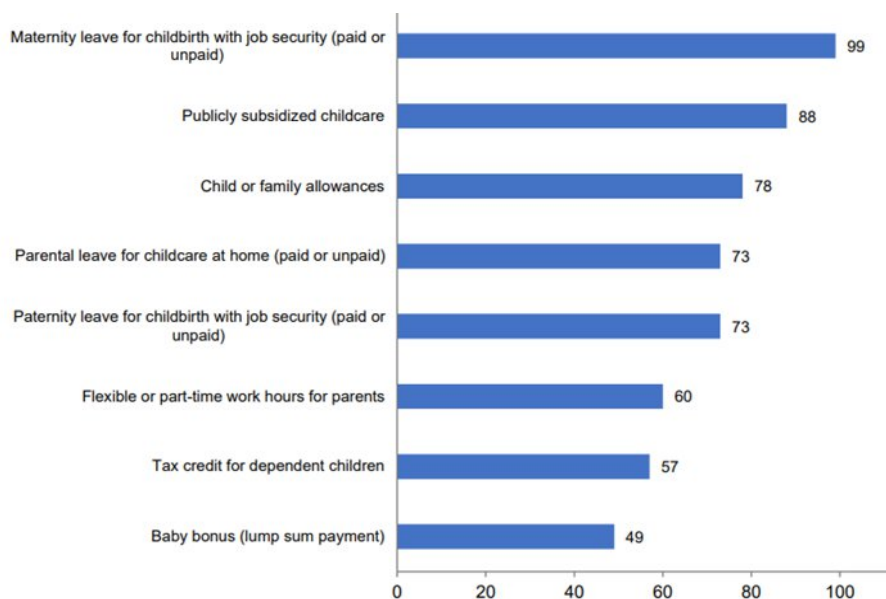
Source: World Population Policies Database, available at www.un.org/development/desa/pd/data/world-population-policies.
Note: Data refer to 82 countries or areas with below replacement fertility during 2015-2019. Multiple responses possible.

[11] https://www.demogr.mpg.de/papers/working/wp-2010-014.pdf
[12] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666622722000077
[13] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/509999/IPOL_STU(2015)509999_EN.pdf
[14] https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210000949/read

Can parents easily combine work & raising children?

The flexibility of work arrangements (including guaranteed parental leave) is essential for rectifying work with raising children, particularly for mothers with young children.[15] For the longer-term, alternative work arrangements in the form of **part-time work, flexible hours, and home office can all further increase the compatibility of employment and child-rearing**.

The availability of high-quality early childhood care, and later, after-school care, quickly become critical practical questions when making decisions about if and when to re-enter the labor force. MPs can help reduce such incompatibilities by **eliminating disconnects between full-time work and the provision of childcare**, with special sensitivity to the daily schedules of mothers.[16] In Europe and Central Asia, estimates suggest existing the supply of childcare remains below demand, with about two-thirds of service providers unable to accept new children straight away and over half needing to use a waiting list.[17] Furthermore, mere availability is insufficient, **childcare must be perceived of high quality** to give mothers who want to work peace of mind to freely decide when to resume their participation in the labor force.
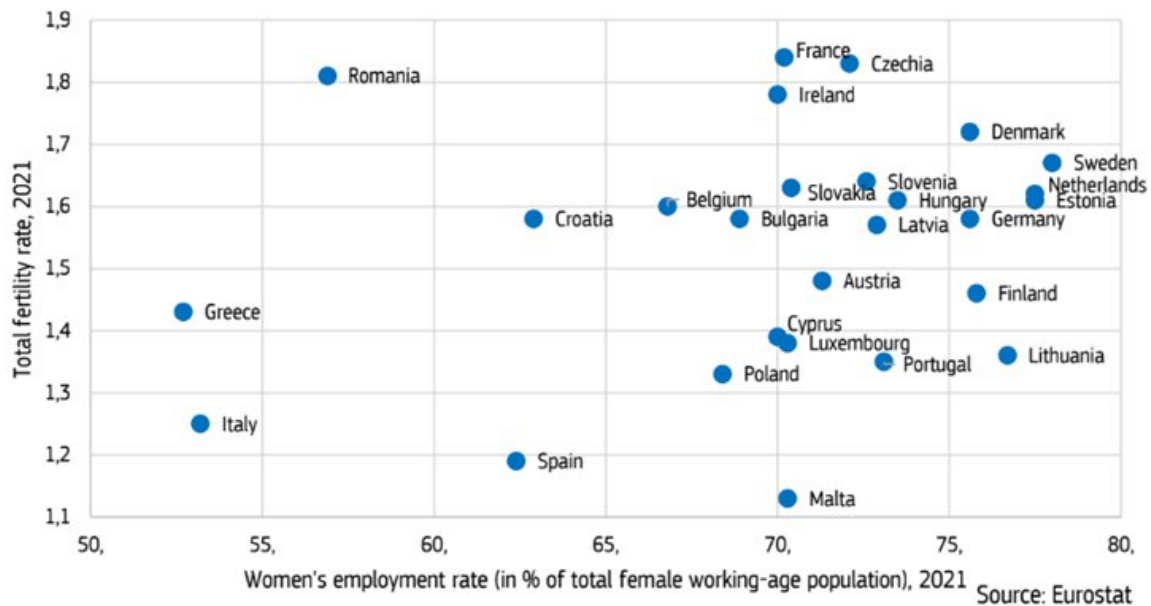
While a career shapes the rhythm of parenthood, it is also influential on the decision to have children in the first place – although differently to what is often assumed. Comparing various countries in Europe, the employment of women actually correlates with fertility (Figure X), highlighting that work and family do not necessarily impose strict trade-offs, and may even aid desires for family by increasing the resources available to women.

Figure X: Women's employment rates & fertility rates in the EU

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[15] https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099431007202325029/pdf/IDU090ab2deb0038e047160b8cb0dc3650a2d1cf.pdf

[16] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/joining-forces-for-gender-equality_67d48024-en/full-report.html

[17] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a5e7a52e-115c-5dd1-97e6-c1b062c945c9/content

Figure: Scatter plot of Total fertility rate, 2021 (y-axis, 1,1 to 1,9) versus Women's employment rate (in % of total female working-age population), 2021 (x-axis, 50 to 80). Source: Eurostat. Countries plotted include Romania, France, Czechia, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Estonia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Belgium, Croatia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Germany, Greece, Austria, Finland, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Lithuania, Italy, Spain, Malta.

| Social Norms & Expectations |

> **What are the prevailing family structures & norms?**

For maximum effectiveness, MPs should make legislation responsive to a variety of family structures present in society. For example, throughout the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region - over time, between and within countries - there are notable variations in age of marriage, divorce rates, cohabitation, and tendencies to live with only the nuclear family or larger 3+ generation households.[18] [19] Increasingly, extended family networks are smaller, and more geographically spread out, making them less available for mothers and fathers to rely upon. Such considerations influence how support for parents can be designed.

Relations between men and women also play a defining role in family dynamics. In many countries **women spend far more time on unpaid care** (Fig X), both in support of children and the elderly, regardless of whether they also participate in the labor force. Such unpaid care may even consist of what is called a dual care-giving burden, when both children and older parents are in need of support during the same period of life. In a world where 2-income households are increasingly a necessity and the traditional sole breadwinner model is challenged, existing

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[18] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-statistical-working-papers/-/ks-ra-10-024

[19] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3372783/

gender dynamics often present unrealistic burdens and reduced access to resources for women. Among other harms, this also creates further roadblocks to family formation.

Figure X: Average Time spent in unpaid care and domestic work, percent of a 24-hour day, 2023[20]
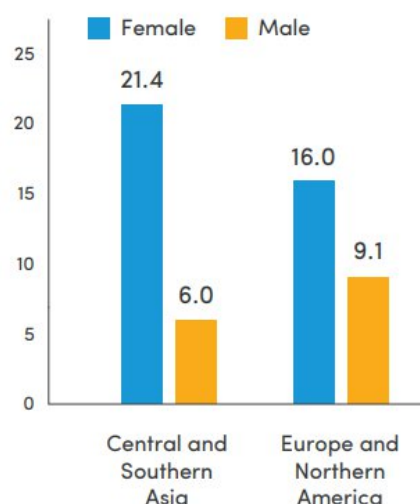
Source: UN Women and the Pardee Cen

(chart to be recreated with EECA sub-regions / country-level data is available)

What are the social expectations for mothers and fathers?

In many countries, society expects young people to first complete their education, secure financial independence and their own housing, and establish a stable career all prior to starting a family.[21] In others, pressures still exist to settle down early and fulfill traditional expectations for the number and gender of children (especially for girls and young women in rural or low-income settings), with little priority on education or long-term planning.[22] Cultural norms set expectations and are reinforced by peers. Without sensitivities to the social context of their constituencies, MPs will have difficulty identifying the most relevant barriers that delay or prevent healthy family formation. Similarly, policy that is responsive to social expectations is essential for translating international best practices into the local context.

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[20] https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/technical-brief-forecasting-time-spent-in-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-en.pdf

[21] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291123003054

[22] https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage%20EECA%20Regional%20Overview.pdf

| Health Concerns |

Is sexual and reproductive health sufficiently supported?

In the global context, childbirth remains the most dangerous day of a mother's life.[23] In recent decades, the EECA region has made significant strides in reducing maternal mortality thanks to improved diffusion of medical technology and practices. However, it is also the world region with the fastest spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)[24], which risks passing complications onto newborns, including stillbirth, congenital infections, sepsis and neonatal death.[25] Cervical cancer is a result of the sexually-transmitted human papillomavirus (HPV) and mostly impacts women aged 35-45, many of whom are young mothers. It has become the second most common cancer-caused death for women in EECA, with troubling rates far above other world regions[26]. To combat this largely preventable form of cancer and other threats, MPs can aim to **enhance awareness and the provision of medical treatments for STIs**, as part of a broader push for sexual and reproductive health literacy.

Many women and the children they carry face health challenges during pregnancy. In Central Asia, one out of every three births is characterized as a 'short interval birth'[27], which is linked to various health complications for the child, including increased likelihood of mortality throughout pregnancy and the early years of life.[28] Rights-based family planning policies can encourage intentional, healthy pregnancies by empowering parents with knowledge and services on many topics (i.e. the spacing of births, the value of screening tests during pregnancy, etc.).[29] Overall, women's access to and uptake of **perinatal care (from prenatal up to a year after birth) makes pregnancies safer and the parents more informed**. To address these challenges to sexual and reproductive health, MPs can work to ensure medical and education systems work together, providing essential services that remains responsive to the needs of women and men.

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[23] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24521517/
[24] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11255029/
[25] https://www.unfpa.org/sexual-reproductive-health#summery105858
[26] https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/regional-alliance-cervical-cancer-prevention
[27] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11067827/#:~:text=In%20Central%20Asia%2C%20about%2033,a%20short%20interval%20%5B19%5D.
[28] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36057919/
[29] https://malaysia.unfpa.org/en/publications/enhancing-human-capital-through-sexual-reproductive-health-investments-and-family

How well is the population informed about infertility?

On the other hand, infertility is a growing issue in highly developed contexts, determined in part by age and lifestyle.[30] From a biological standpoint the timing of fertility has natural boundaries, with both early and late-age pregnancies presenting their own health challenges (birth weight, genetic conditions of the child, well-being of the mother, etc.). The rising average age of motherhood in particular is associated with reduced ability to conceive.[31] Exposures to environmental pollutants and physical inactivity are also contributing to the rise in infertility, especially the alarming decline in sperm counts, which is limiting options for would-be parents.[32]

In response, MPs can **ask whether the education and medical systems are fully informing the population about infertility,** while also **investing in research to better understand the causes**. MPs will also be increasingly confronted with decisions on how to prevent infertility, including the regulation of the emerging class of medical procedures to treat infertility (IVF, egg freezing, and other methods), with 23 European countries funding cycles of IUI (intrauterine insemination) as of 2024.[33] While there are multiple avenues to potentially address infertility – with greater regulation of consumer products (exposure to harmful chemicals), lifestyle public health campaigns, or medical interventions – it is posed to be a growing barrier to achieving desired fertility if left unchecked.

Important to keep in mind...

Realistic Expectations: Fertility and family formation patterns are complex. In addition to those factors covered, they depend on intangible forces beyond the direct reach of singular legislative acts, such as social, cultural, and gender norms, confidence in institutions, and feelings about the future. It is important therefore to set expectations for policy interventions accordingly.

Maintaining Coherence: The wide-ranging multi-sectoral nature of family policy requires incentivized, active coordination between different implementing bodies. MPs are encouraged to support the use of lean, effective oversight committees that can encourage policy stability and continuity over time – preconditions for public awareness and trust in family policy.

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[30] https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/infertility/

[31] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1521693420300961

[32] https://academic.oup.com/humrep/article-abstract/24/7/1561/2357470?redirectedFrom=fulltext

[33] https://fertilityeurope.eu/atlas2024/

2) Opportunities & Skills for Youth

Youth is a time in life full of enthusiasm, curiosity, and above all, great potential. However, the young people of many nations in Europe and Central Asia often lack sufficient support to productively cultivate their talents, evidenced by high inactivity rates in education, training, and work[34] and high emigration in search of better prospects abroad[35]. Without meaningful opportunities for establishing themselves in society, young people can wither on the vine – to the detriment of themselves, and to their communities.

Demographic Resilience relies on the formation, activation, and retention of human capital. For this vision, the role of youth cannot be taken for granted. Particularly amid population aging, today's young people will play a critical role in the fate of the labor force and keeping society vibrant with fresh ideas. **How economically activated today's youth becomes can make a major difference in the future sustainability of social systems and dependency burdens**.[36] [37]

When young people cannot enter into their local economies, either remaining inactive for prolonged periods of time or leaving the country, it represents lost investments in human capital. Such investments come from families, but also the state, in the form of the education and social systems. Robust dialogue with young constituents can equip parliamentarians with tools to discern the most pressing challenges, guiding their policy responses accordingly.

Key Observation: The potential of young people often goes unfulfilled[38]

While youth unemployment has declined since 2020, the long-term trend shows much of Eastern Europe and Central Asia still have rates well above those seen a generation before, in the early 1990s. In fact, youth unemployment would appear even greater if not for high out-migration acting as a partial 'mask' for the true extent of the challenges.

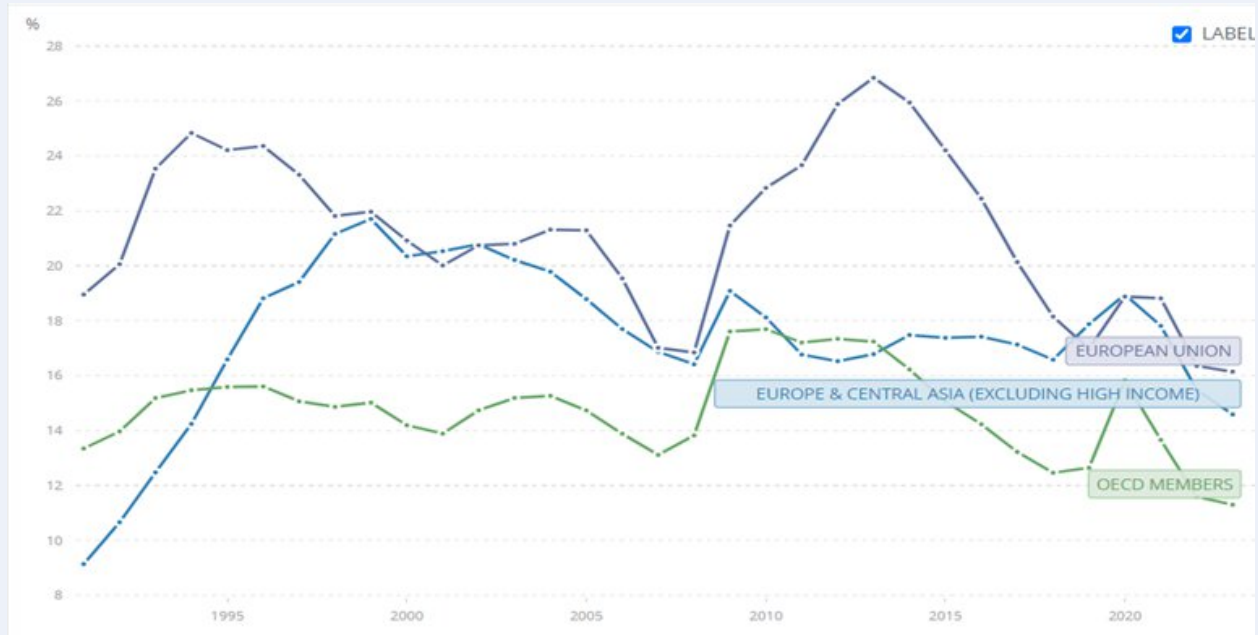
[34] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00036846.2019.1677848
[35] https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1607.pdf
[36] https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP14%20Supplement%20Final_0.pdf
[37] https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC116398
[38] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?end=2023&locations=7E-OE-EU&start=1991

Figure X: Youth Unemployment, 1991-2023

| Educational Factors |

> **How relevant are the skills students learn for working life?**

Whenever young people typically exit the education system – whether after general secondary, vocational, or university programs – they should have marketable skills that will empower them to earn a livelihood. MPs can help smooth the school-to-work transition and reduce skill mismatches by **incentivizing the education system to coordinate with employers.** Such a dynamic can facilitate a wiser allocation of state resources and enforce a degree of accountability for returns to human capital.

Specifically, launching dual education pilot programs and facilitating public-private partnerships between education and employers is critical.[39] Such coordination facilitates to design relevant curricula, but also ensures that the number and type of studies bear some resemblance to actual jobs in the economy.[40] Additional policy options include subsidizing or otherwise rewarding

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[39] https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum3-12-panel3.pdf

[40] https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2016/04/getting-skills-right-assessing-and-anticipating-changing-skill-needs_g1g649ca/9789264252073-en.pdf

with preferential tax treatment or grants fields of study with higher rates of labor market placements.

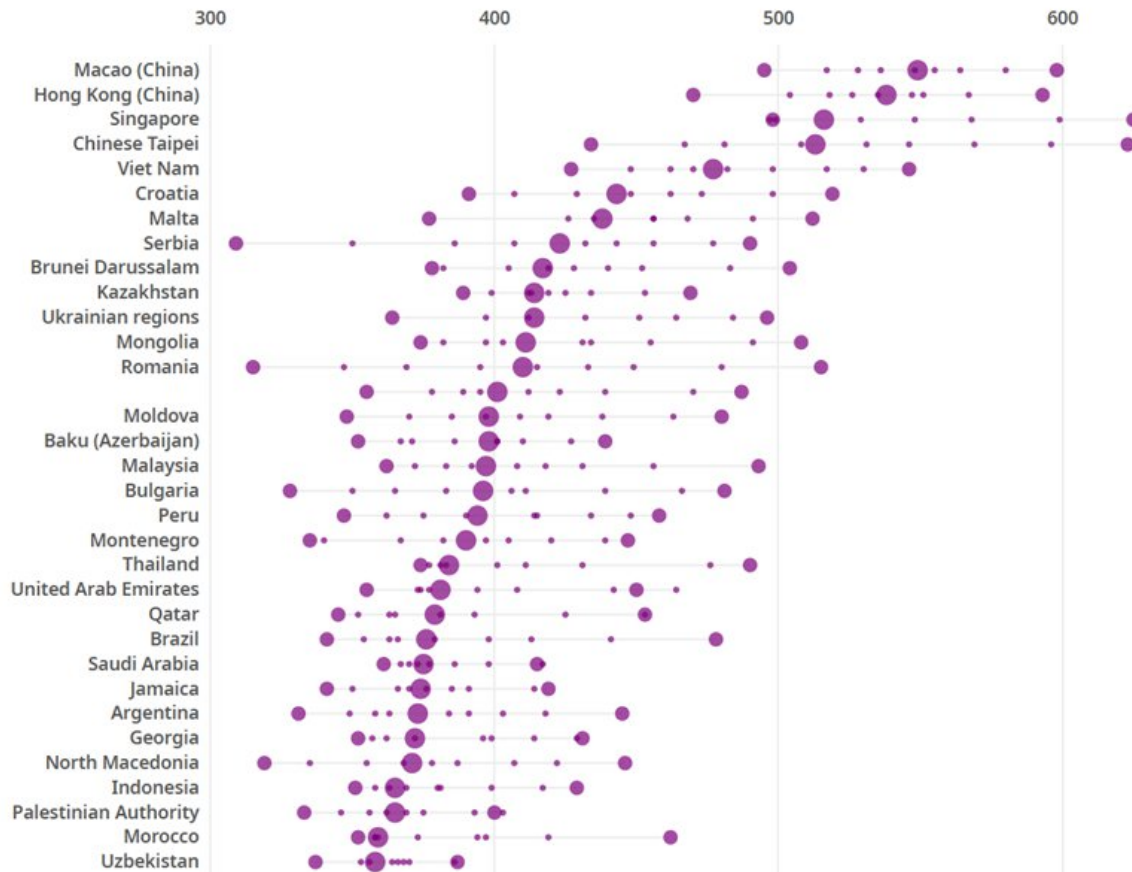## How are learning outcomes monitored?

Both the 'quantity' and 'quality' of education matter for young peoples' success.[41] How many years spent in education is optimal depends on the value it brings. In many contexts, reduced standards have led to education or qualification 'inflation', changing the perceived (and real) meaning of a degree. **Without robust quality controls and oversight, formal education can lose its potency as an empowering springboard for the youth.**

MPs can monitor learning outcomes using international tests, such as the PISA system (see Fig X). Maximizing educational outcomes depends on attracting capable and motivated teachers, which is a function of salaries and a social status that honors their role. It also depends on aligning educational institutions' financial interests with quality outcomes, rather than simply enrollment or the number of degrees awarded.

Figure X: Average PISA scores (mathematics), 2022[42]

[41] https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/learning-time-and-disciplinary-climate.html#:~:text=PISA%202022%20found%20that%20systems,to%20score%20higher%20in%20mathematics.

[42] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i_53f23881-en.html

| Social Environment |

How do today's youth interact with digital technologies?

While digital connectivity opens many doors for skills development, entertainment, and creativity, it also can expose children and young adults to harmful content and potential for cybercrime (including facilitating sexual harassment and abuse). Considering the vulnerability of young people, MPs must judiciously decide how to regulate the timing and extent to which they should be brought into the digital space.

Today's youth are widely considered 'digital natives', yet digital access and skills are still limited in some low-income country contexts and among particular subsets of the population. Eliminating such digital divides presents MPs with a clear goal, making sure all young people have access to the digital skills needed to pursue their self-development and goals.

Do young people have confidence in the future?

Poor economic conditions can clearly drive youth pessimism, but so do broader social conditions that restrict young people's ability to develop and use their talents. MPs can fight against disillusion by **enforcing fair rules – fighting against corruption and promoting merit-based access to opportunities**.[43] Reassurances are particularly needed in settings where young people's life trajectories are put in motion, such as education and entry-level jobs.

The higher goal is to inspire confidence in institutions and the intergenerational social contract, which calls for meaningful opportunities for the next generation to establish themselves. MPs have the chance to set the tone of national dialogue in this regard. They can advance the interests of young people by **incentivizing employers to take on apprentices**, **raising the social status of professions that are needed by society**, and **encouraging young adults to gain work experience early in life**. With these and other signals, MPs can speak directly to the concerns and welfare of young people, furthering goals of Demographic Resilience.

Important to keep in mind...

Meaningful Accountability: Educational institutions (especially those partially or fully funded with state resources) require rigorous, regular tracking of outcomes and adjustment to maintain quality. MPs can incentivize the use of evidence- and outcome-based decisions to strengthen alignment between education and the skills needed by society.

Comprehensive Empowerment: The well-being of young people is directly tied to their ability to navigate the world. MPs have the chance to broaden horizons and foster a sense of purpose by encouraging responsibility and leadership early in life through volunteering, work experience, and a culture of mentorship, community engagement, and intergenerational exchange.

Robust Dialogue: The basis for any youth policy should be consultative and reflect sensitivity to the concerns of young people for a fair, stable system that provides room to thrive. Without active exchange, policy may neglect key barriers to their full, productive participation in society.

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[43] https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/kproducts/The-impacts-of-corruption-on-young-people-and-their-role-in-preventing-corruption-U4-Helpdesk_FinalDraft.pdf

3) Healthy & Active Aging

Populations across the world are aging. It is most rapidly occurring in developing countries, and most advanced in developed countries.[44] While concerns about how to adapt are legitimate, greater longevity is first and foremost a cause for celebration. The ultimate meaning of this change heavily depends on how society adjusts.

It is important for MPs to acknowledge that population aging is here to stay. It is a natural consequence of development in general, and the Demographic Transition (see Appendix for details) in particular. While inevitable, it also brings opportunities to a self-reinforcing cycle of development thanks to increased savings rates and greater incentives to invest in human capital (the "2nd Demographic Dividend"; see Appendix for further details).

Once human capital is cultivated – both mental and physical – it requires regular use and maintenance throughout life. Healthy and active aging is clearly for the benefit of individuals, but also for families and the broader community, which must provide time-intensive and emotionally draining care in the later years of life when health often declines. While aging is a reality with biological limits, it can follow very different trajectories.

Key Observation: People are living longer, and spending more years in good health.[45]

Questioning the border of 'old age' is increasingly justified. The average 65-year-old today is in better health than in previous generations.[46] [47] Across the board, countries are seeing a rise in not only life expectancy, but healthy life expectancy (see Fig X). This combination of trends underscores how chronological age is only one way to set expectations for members of society, and as a concept, needs regular updating.
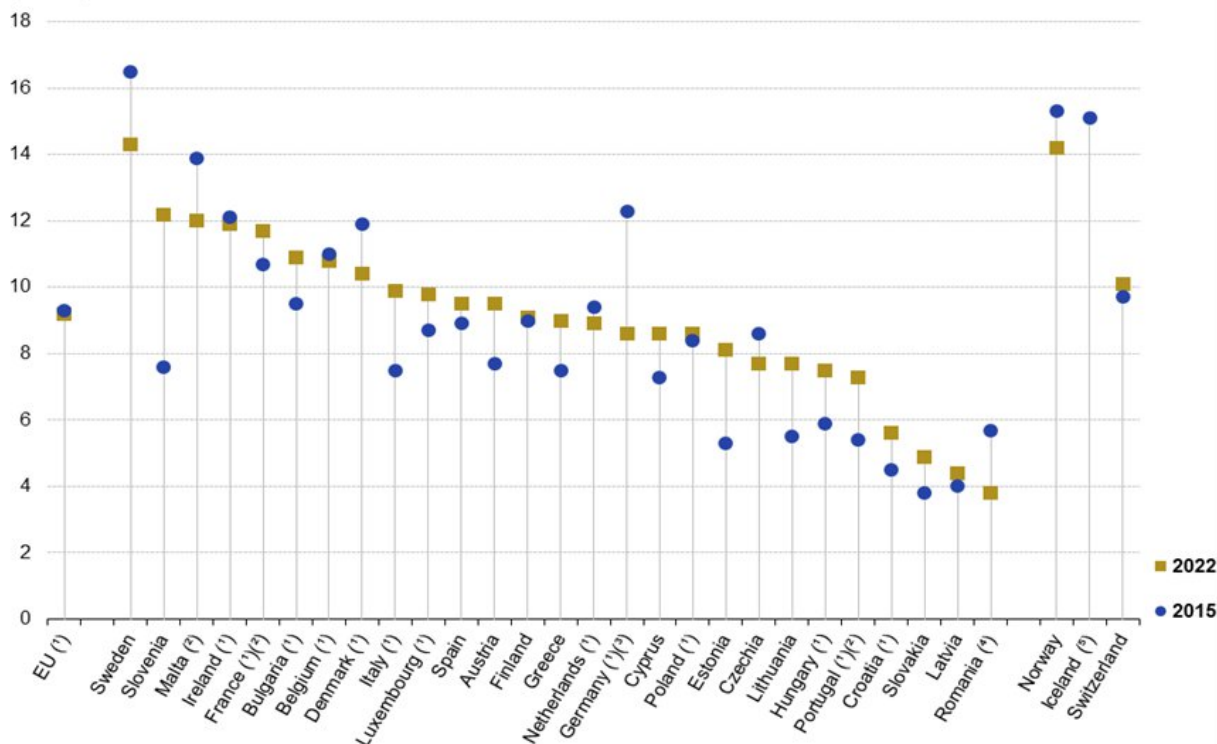
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[44] https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA-Exec-Summary.pdf
[45] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Healthy_life_years_statistics

[46] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5897168/
[47] https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0179171

Healthy life years at age 65 years, women, 2015–22
(years)

Legend: ■ 2022 ● 2015

[This chart can be recreated for EECA countries, or the sub-regional averages – which would make it easier to display both men and women.]

| Public Health |

How does existing policy support healthy life expectancy and old-age care?

Lifespans are clearly getting longer, and MPs have a role to play in ensuring those years are spent in good health. Good habits (and aging) start early and have no substitute for treatments later in life when chronic conditions start to manifest. Fig X displays the main causes of disease in the world and in EECA. Non-communicable, lifestyle-related diseases remain the dominant health issue, with cardiovascular disease burden above the global average. Disease prevalence can also vary greatly within populations. For example, men live about 5 years fewer than women as a global average, with the gap as wide as 10 years in some EECA countries, driven in part by

heavy alcohol consumption.[48] At the same time, women spend more years in poor health – a reality which underscores how measuring the health of a population cannot be done by length of life alone.

Figure X: Past and projected causes of disease, Global (left), EECA (right), 1990-2050[49]
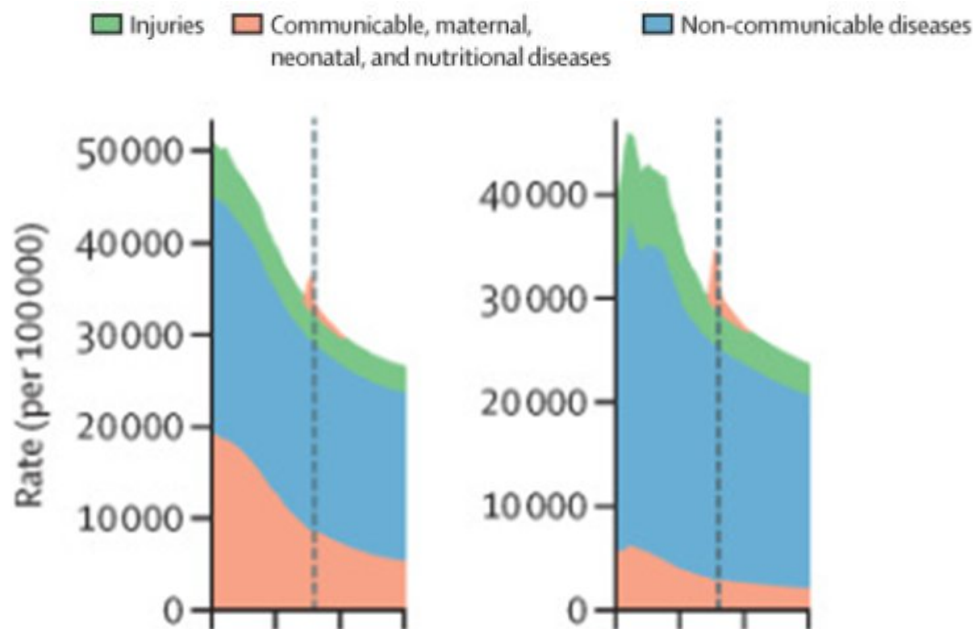
MPs can promote healthy aging through a range of approaches. They can do so through the **funding of sports initiatives and promotion of regular physical exercise at all ages**, as well as the regulation of harmful substances in food and consumer products. Public health campaigns have proven to be a powerful tool for discouraging behaviors that compromise health (i.e. tobacco consumption). A comprehensive public health agenda will keep people informed and able to lead health-affirming daily routines, with a heavy emphasis on preventative checks and measures.

While preventative measures are a strategic necessity, countries must also prepare for the inevitability of deteriorating health. Many seniors, especially th 'oldest-old', find themselves in need of long-term care (LTC). However, affordability of LTC remains an unsolved issue in many countries, with high out-of-pocket costs and putting seniors at higher risk of living in poverty.

[48] https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/news/faqs-demographic-change
[49] https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)00685-8/fulltext

MPs can help **protect vulnerable seniors by supporting a robust LTC network of affordable at-home and institutional care options**.[50]

| Employment |

How does the retirement system respond to improving health?

An ever-growing gap between life expectancy and the years spent working is clearly not sustainable. When pension systems were first established the average length of retirement lasted only a few years. Today that number is 18.4 years for men and 22.8 for women in the OECD (see Fig X).[51] [52] It is therefore a fiscal necessity for the state to recognize the value that older workers offer and encourage them to remain active in the labor force.

Figure X: Age at Labor Market Exit vs. Years in Retirement, OECD average, 1972-2022
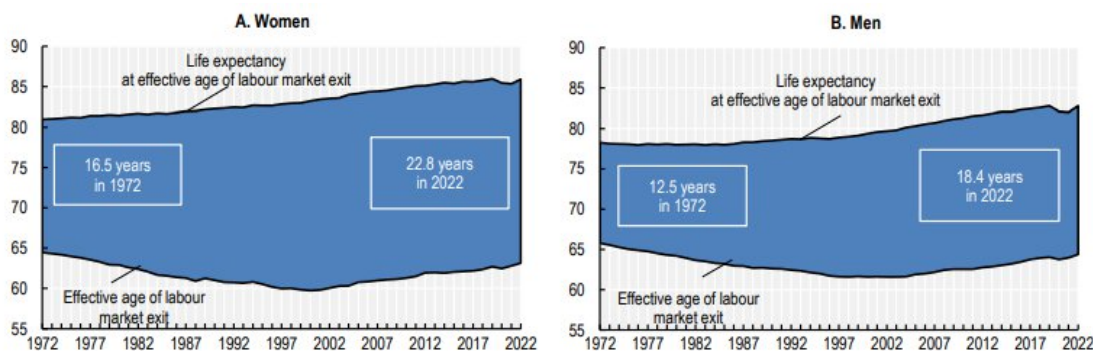
Note: Life expectancy at labour market exit is based on period-specific mortality rates.
Source: OECD calculations based on United Nations Population Prospects: 2022 Revision, exit ages: see previous section.

Policy interventions can secure flexible retirement options for workers as a way to prevent artificially forcing retirement on the basis of age, rather than competencies. Besides statutory retirement, even incentivizing the retirement of individuals who are interested and able to continue working runs counter to emerging concepts of active aging. Instead, more structural and **enduring policy solutions explicitly link retirement with life expectancy**. This option has been increasingly adopted by countries[53], relying upon a formula, which typically adjusts the retirement age upward by a few weeks per year. Such an approach provides relative

[50] https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/ageing-and-long-term-care/social-protection-for-older-people-with-ltc-needs.html
[51] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pensions-at-a-glance-2011_pension_glance-2011-en.html
[52] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pensions-at-a-glance-2023_678055dd-en.html
[53] https://www.etk.fi/en/work-and-pensions-abroad/international-comparisons/retirement-ages/

predictability and allows for planning, while it can also diffuse tensions and highly contentious political battles associated with proposals for large jumps in the retirement age.

| Social Concerns |

Do seniors have sufficient opportunities to stay socially active after retirement?

While retirement is a goal for many workers, it can come at a high price if they do not have a strong community. The loss of a social network upon retiring is associated with a greater than 50% higher risk of being in poor health, in addition to higher incidence of depression.[54] Loneliness is found to have a U-shaped curve across life that peaks in late adolescence and again in the years after retirement.[55] Many retirees have insufficient opportunities to stay engaged with the community, leading to an abrupt drop-off in physical and social activity.

MPs can make a difference by ensuring retirees have clear opportunities to volunteer and otherwise participate in community activities. Interactions among their peers as well as with the younger generations each bring their own set of benefits for well being.[56] In particular, adolescent-senior exchange programs (i.e. those in art, technological literacy, cultural heritage, health education, and therapeutic activities) are shown to enhance shared feelings of intergenerational solidarity and self-esteem, and cognitive function among seniors.[57] [58] In keeping with the Demographic Resilience framework, helping seniors to stay socially active after retirement and integrated with the local community is fundamental to maintaining well-being (and human capital) of the population.

Important to keep in mind...

Life-Cycle Approach: Active and healthy aging requires long-term planning, instilling a strong preventative mentality in legislative efforts and the public. Chronic health conditions and other illnesses may express themselves later in life, but their it is the habits and lifestyle choices of younger years which set them in motion.

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[54] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10172431/
[55] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17456916221127218
[56] https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/WHO-Active-Ageing-Framework.pdf
[57] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15350770.2018.1500333?src=recsys
[58] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15350770.2023.2267532#d1e401

Sustainable Support: As populations continue to age, social protection systems are under increasing pressure to meet the needs of vulnerable seniors. Reforming pension systems and other benefits to no longer rely upon a 'pyramid-shaped' age structure is essential to remain solvent and sustainable in the long-run.

Section 5: Takeaways

The nations of Europe and Central Asia face a wide variety of socio-economic settings and policy needs due to demographic change. However, nearly all countries are on the same broad long-term trajectory of better health, greater longevity, smaller family structures, and higher productivity. In preparing for the coming decades, MPs have a duty to prepare their nation for adaptation to population aging as the 'pyramid-shaped' age structure increasingly fades into the past. **Many of the feared impacts of inevitable demographic change can be prevented, or even transformed into advantages, with strategic reforms to social protection systems, services, and infrastructure.**

The preceding sections 1) introduced the Demographic Resilience framework, 2) highlighted the critical roles MPs play in furthering demographic policy, and 3) explored thematic dives through the lens of Demographic Resilience. Ultimately, the toolkit serves as a springboard for further investigation. It calls on MPs to become demographic policy leaders in their respective parliaments, approaching the complex nature of demographic change with a critical eye and nuance. This leadership can be used to **pursue Demographic Dividends by investing in the population's health, skills, well-being, and life prospects.**

Specific steps forward include establishing parliamentary committees or other structures that are as long-lasting as demographic change itself, not bound to election cycles and preferably backed by stable government funding. The work of such organized groups for population policies should **recognize the needs for long-term planning, a comprehensive cross-sectoral vision, commitment to regular monitoring, sensitivity to the local cultural context, and robust interaction with stakeholders to build and maintain trust.**

To judge the potential impact of policy interventions and set expectations, MPs depend on demographic analyses and projections, which themselves depend on stable political commitment to data collection (Population and Housing Census, surveys, etc.). While true for many public policy areas, **effective population policies lend themselves to evidence-based decisions and often need many years before the fruits of past investments become apparent.**

Ultimately, the path to achieve Demographic Resilience involves a living, dynamic process. Parliamentarians have the chance to guide their nations in this process by crafting population policies that remain focused on what matters most – cultivating the basis of any resilient society, its people.

Annex: Demographic 'Crash Course'

Popular dialogue routinely oversimplifies the causes and consequences of demographic change to the point of being misleading. This includes the certainty of the potential impacts and how much policy interventions can hope to influence the trends. To equip parliamentarians for informed discussions, this section of the toolkit dispels a few common demographic myths and defines some basic demographic concepts relevant for policy-makers.

What counts as "demographic"?

The number of people is just one of many ways to describe a population. While many know that demographics also concerns the age and sex structure of a population, those two still just scratch the surface. A population is also defined by its composition in terms of language, ethnicity, nationality, religion, income, urban-rural residence, educational attainment, labor force participation, and countless other characteristics of consequence. The three demographic forces of change (fertility, mortality, and migration) typically show substantial variations when differentiating between these important sources of diversity within a population.

Misconception #1:

"Population aging (and population decline) bring socio-economic harm"

Population aging, and decline, are regularly framed as if they are synonymous with civilizational decline. However, it is important to be precise and holistic when anticipating potential impacts.

While populations are aging, the average health is also improving. This means that a 60-year-old today is not the same as a 60-year-old a few generations ago, neither in terms of health status nor productive potential. While there are challenges (transition costs), population aging also makes possible the 2nd Demographic Dividend – a social shift incentivizing investments in human capital (see core concepts section for more information).

Evidence shows that GDP growth has continued in countless settings with low-fertility and stable or declining populations[59]. In fact, many of the most livable, successful, and high HDI societies have relatively small populations. Pursuing population growth, especially at the expense of neglecting other factors, can hinder, not help a country's development and overall resilience.

Misconception #2:

"Population aging can be meaningfully slowed down by either more births or migration"

Population aging is essentially unstoppable in the modern context with socio-economic development. It is primarily a result of medical advances and healthier lifestyles allowing people to live longer lives – which is a public health success. To keep the population 'young' by contrast, would require everyone to have shorter lives, surely not a popular policy pursuit.

In most low fertility settings, rebounds in fertility would hardly make a difference in the speed of population aging. Even today's highest fertility countries are aging. Similarly, migration has only

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[59] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-023-02223-7?fromPaywallRec=false

a temporary effect, as migrants age too and create more retirees for tomorrow. Any lasting effect would require an ever-doubling of migration flows. Population aging requires acceptance and adaptation rather than unrealistic attempts to fight against the tide.

Misconception #3:
"Today's demographic trends will inevitably lead to labor shortages"

Trends indicate that most countries of the world will see fewer 'working age' adults in the coming decades. Therefore, it is common to assume that the future will see critical shortages of human capital and an unsustainable rise in retirees. However, in many countries the labor force continues to grow or maintain itself due to parallel demographic trends in progress, especially increases in female labor force participation, and healthier and more active seniors. In the end, the prospect of shortages is heavily dependent on how well nations cultivate and activate their population's potential.

Secondly, demographic trends have no meaning without the larger context. In a world of rapid technological progress, it is difficult to say with confidence how the future demand for labor might be transformed – both in the amount of labor and type of skills needed by the economy. In most countries young cohorts are advancing further in their education than ever before, further suggesting reasons for more nuanced claims when discussing demographic trends and their implications for the labor force.

Core Concepts in Brief

The following are recurring themes in demography relevant for parliamentarians. Understanding these core concepts is critical to knowing how to properly draft demographic legislation and monitor the results.

Demographic Transition

The global pattern of development when a society shifts from high mortality and fertility (seen throughout the pre-modern era) to the low mortality and fertility that comes with modernization. Typically, mortality falls first, followed by fertility. The lag time is when rapid population growth occurs, before a new, more stable equilibrium is reached.

Policy-makers should not expect perfect stability as a final result however, since populations naturally continue to fluctuate. In the late stages of the Demographic Transition countries see an end to population growth or even shrinking, although the population sizes typically remain far above their pre-modern levels.

The five stages of the demographic transition
The demographic transition is a model that describes why rapid population growth is a temporary phenomenon.
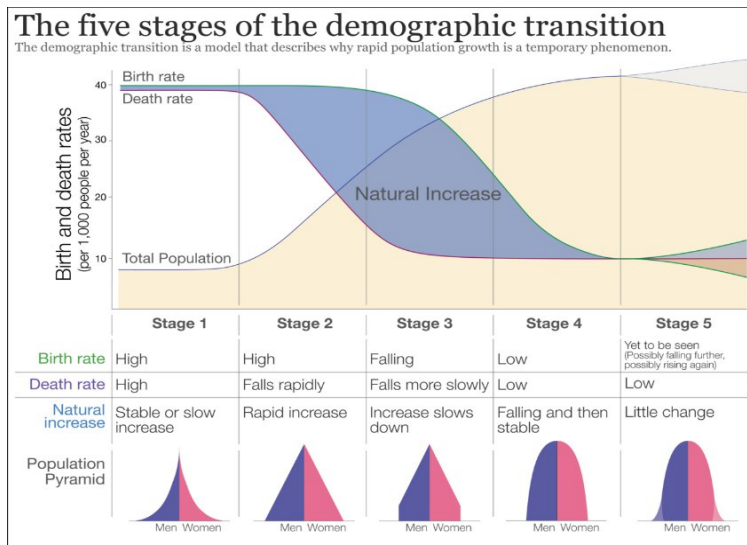
Why it Matters: Completing the Demographic Transition brings a higher quality of life for individuals and a more advanced level of development. It also grants access to the Demographic Dividend (see next term).

Demographic Dividend (1ˢᵗ & 2ⁿᵈ)

The developmental 'bonus' from when a demographic structure produces more workers in society relative to dependents. The 1ˢᵗ Demographic Dividend is a window of opportunity based solely on age structure, when a high proportion of the population is in the working ages, and correspondingly there are fewer dependents (children or seniors) in need of support. If harnessed, this can serve as an engine for economic development.

The 2ⁿᵈ Demographic Dividend becomes attainable when extending lifespans, in what is sometimes labeled as the emerging 'longevity societies', incentivizes greater rates of saving,

planning, and investments in human capital. While the 1st Demographic Dividend is a powerful force for development, it is also tied to a specific moment in time. The 2nd on the other hand is not limited to a certain period and can bring even greater rewards for development.

Why it Matters: Unlocking both the 1st & 2nd Demographic Dividends presents substantial opportunities and should be the cornerstone of any population policy.

Human Capital

The term 'human capital' describes the capacities of people, including their collective mental, physical, and spiritual strengths. In terms of what is readily measurable and workable for policy-makers, discussions of human capital typically focus on education and health outcomes. Such dimensions of human capital can be measured in terms of quantity <u>and</u> quality to give a complete picture (e.g. not only graduation rates, but the tested outcomes).

Why it Matters: Human capital is perhaps the single most decisive factor in determining the resilience of society

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'Period' vs. 'Cohort' Fertility Measures

Policy-makers have an important decision to make when it comes to monitoring fertility. Period measures capture the number of births in a given time frame (typically a year), which can either control for the number of childbearing-aged women (i.e. Total Fertility Rate) or not (live births). On the other hand, a cohort measure reflects the completed fertility of a cohort of women after their childbearing years.

Period fertility measures offer a snapshot of a certain time and therefore can show large variations by year, especially sensitive to economic downturns, the outbreak of armed conflict, or other shocks. Cohort fertility measures give a more comprehensive view, but have the drawback of only being generated retroactively, giving insights on recent, past generations.

Why it Matters: *Period vs. Cohort measures can tell very different stories about the demographic indicators of interest to parliamentarians.*

Population Momentum

Even if a population has 'replacement level' fertility, it can either continue to grow or shrink, due to the existing age structure. This phenomenon is referred to as demographic momentum. Specifically, it depends on the number of child-bearing women. For example, even if the birth rate decreases, the size of past cohorts can nevertheless cause population growth simply due to the echoes of past demographic behaviors. These echoes can last for a few generations.

Why it Matters: *Beware of making quick judgments when assessing the efficacy of a policy. Policy-makers should anticipate delayed results, with population momentum ensuring a lag time even for successful policy interventions.*