



DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

HOW CAN REGIONAL AND COHESION POLICIES TACKLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract

This study provides an overview of regional demographic structures and trends in the EU with the focus on their likely effects on socio-economic and territorial cohesion and the role of Cohesion Policy in addressing demographic change. In detail it analyses how and to what extent the 2007-13 European Cohesion Policy and Structural Funds have been tackling demographic change at the regional level in order to derive useful indications on how Cohesion Policy actions could be more effective in the future programming period (2014-2020). The study contains a literature and data review on demographic and spatial trends in the EU regions and the main policy developments; a review of Cohesion Policy programming documents for 2007-2013; an in-depth field analysis of ten regional case studies and good practices and finally, a horizontal reading of the main findings to draw conclusions and policy recommendations for the 2014-2020 programming period.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study provides an overview of regional demographic trends in the EU and of the role of Cohesion Policy in addressing demographic change, in order to derive indications for the future programming period.

Main demographic challenges

Population decline and ageing are the most challenging trends for the future, while international migration has become a major driver of population growth as from the 1990s, except for a few eastern European countries for which net migration is negative. There are however great variations in demographic patterns between the European regions, depending on various socio-economic factors. Demographic trends also have effects on the spatial conditions of the EU with peripheral and rural areas as well as post-industrial urban and mountain areas more at risk of de-population.

These demographic trends have important socio-economic and policy implications due to their impact on: productivity and growth; the provision of social and healthcare services; urban-rural population imbalances; and the shortage of workers. Demographic change is thus a mainstream issue involving different policy areas and levels of intervention including: social protection systems, employment policies, urban and rural planning, communication and social infrastructures, gender equality and family policies, education and training policies, immigration and integration policies.

Demographic change is now at the forefront of European, national and regional policies. The Commission has stimulated debate and produced data, indicators and reports; stressed the need for reforms; and adapted Structural Fund regulations and Community Strategic Guidelines to support policies to adapt to demographic change. In the Europe 2020 growth strategy, in particular, the demographic challenges are addressed by most of the Flagship Initiatives. In 2011 the European Parliament enacted a Resolution devoted to the implications of demographic change for Cohesion Policy at the regional level. Member States are reviewing their tax and benefits systems to encourage workers to remain longer in the labour market, while a number of Regions are at the forefront of strategic thinking with actions to tackle their specific demographic challenges.

The role of Cohesion Policy

Cohesion Policy can play an important role in supporting regional adaptation to demographic change and reversing the risks of wider development gaps between regions due to demographic trends. Most of the priority themes of the ERDF and ESF Structural Funds can address demographic risks. The growing importance of demographic issues is reflected in their increasing prominence in the Cohesion Policy 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods, even though there is no explicit attention to demographic change among the horizontal principles.

According to our estimations, in the 2007-2013 period a total of EUR 64.1 billion (19% of the total ERDF, ESF and Cohesion Fund allocated to the Member States) have been dedicated to priority themes directly or indirectly targeting demographic challenges.

The ten territorial case studies representative of different demographic and socio-economic conditions show an increasing awareness of and attention to demographic change at the local level:

- Cohesion Policy measures are often the main provisions that address demographic challenges at the regional and local level and often complement national/regional strategies.
- Cohesion Policy value added lies especially in the provision of social infrastructures and the regeneration of urban and/or rural areas with ERDF measures, and in the promotion of the employability and inclusion of the elderly, women, young people and migrants with ESF measures. Territorial Cooperation has been effective in supporting institutional learning in the field.
- The potential of Cohesion Policy interventions has, however, been limited in some cases by the lack of a comprehensive strategy addressing the demographic challenges and by the scant awareness of the potential of the Structural Funds in tackling demographic change. Cohesion measures have indeed the potential to exploit the opportunities arising from demographic change through the valorization of the elderly population, migrants and women as economic agents and drivers for the demand and supply of technological innovation, new products and services.

Initial discussion of the strategic priorities for the 2014-2020 period shows the intention to pay greater attention to the demographic challenges and the consequences of the crisis. Greater integration and synergies between Cohesion Policy and other Structural Funds as well as between these funds and national and regional strategies are also envisaged.

Policy implications

The following main policy implications emerge from the study. They are consistent with the indications of the European Parliament 2011 Resolution and in part they have already found reference in the amended draft legislative package framing Cohesion Policy for 2014-2020 and in the cross-cutting policy objectives of the Common Strategic Framework.

To improve the effectiveness of the Structural Funds in addressing demographic change in the next programming period it would be necessary to promote:

- greater and more specific focus on demographic change as a priority area within the final Regulations and dissemination of guidelines to support Member States and Regions, exploring the potential Structural Funds may have in addressing demographic change in the design and implementation of Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes;
- greater coordination and integration of the activities promoted by the different Structural Funds and greater flexibility in their use to enhance complementarities and consistency;
- a more pro-active approach in demographic policy-making and the exchange of good practices and experiences for institutional learning;
- specific tools for the monitoring and evaluation of the potential and actual effects of Structural Funds in addressing demographic change through the provision of guidelines and the further development of relevant demographic indicators in order to enable monitoring and evaluation systems to collect and, consequently, evaluate, relevant key data;

- provision of technical support to the managing authorities and local stakeholders for the implementation of effective policies addressing demographic change at both the national and regional level.

Given its role as co-legislator with the Council, the European Parliament has an important role in these processes, promoting greater attention to the demographic challenges and an integrated policy approach - in EU policies in general and in Cohesion Policy in particular -, and a pro-active approach in this field. The coming months will be particularly important and the European Parliament should monitor the application of the 2011 Resolution and reinforce its supervisory role with regard to the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy in addressing demographic change.