OPINION

of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

on an old continent growing older – possibilities and challenges related to ageing policy post-2020
(2020/2008(INI))

Rapporteur for opinion: Luke Ming Flanagan
SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development calls on the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution:

A. whereas the demographic old-age dependency ratio (people aged 65 or above relative to those aged 15-64) is projected to increase significantly in the EU as a whole in the coming decades; whereas it has risen to 31.4 % in 2019\(^1\), and is projected to rise further, notably up to 52 % in 2050\(^2\) and reaching 51.2 % in 2070;

B. whereas demographic developments in relation to the ageing of the population have different impacts in the European regions, affecting rural and remote areas more severely; whereas these areas are also experiencing a decline in their population; whereas population decline may have a negative impact on the social, economic and territorial cohesion of the EU;

C. whereas an ageing population can act as a source of knowledge about local traditions, food and ways of life in rural areas, which, in turn, can be used to develop local tourism and business;

D. whereas Europe’s ageing population is a demographic phenomenon involving a decrease both in fertility and in mortality rates and a higher life expectancy among the European population;

E. whereas demographic change varies considerably across Member States and their regions, with rural and disadvantaged areas most prone to shrinking and ageing populations;

F. whereas employed workers, in the 55-64 age group, represented 59.1 % of the labour force in the EU in 2019\(^3\); whereas, in 2016, around one third of the managers of family farms were aged 65 or over, and the majority (57 %) were aged at least 55 or over; whereas only 1 in 10 farm managers were under the age of 40;

G. whereas the demographic situation severely impacts the social, economic and territorial cohesion of the EU; whereas it is important for the EU to mainstream demographic issues in all its policies;

H. whereas the worrying demographic trends in EU rural areas exacerbate the socio-economic divide and increase the risk of poverty and social exclusion;

I. whereas the upcoming Green Paper on Ageing and Long-term Vision for Rural Areas will outline the EU’s strategy for tackling the impact of demographic change on our socio-economic fabric;

J. whereas generational renewal is one of the CAP’s post-2020 specific objectives;

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\(^1\) https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00198/default/table?lang=en
\(^3\) https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem050/default/table?lang=en
whereas knowledge transfer and intergenerational learning are crucial to increasing cooperation and solidarity between generations, thus bridging the generation gap;

K. whereas the current situation of older people on the labour market and more broadly in society shows that vast and decisive investment is needed in areas such as equal opportunities, lifelong learning, employment assistance and health provision in order to tackle the growing economic and social inequalities within the EU;

L. whereas older people in rural or remote areas may face higher age-related risks, including poverty, poorer access to quality health care and services, less social support or fewer opportunities for social interaction and a lack of access to public transport services;

M. whereas there are considerable disparities between the regions of the European Union in terms of demographic change, with a tendency towards urban overpopulation on the one hand and rural exodus on the other;

N. whereas rural areas and peripheral regions are seriously affected by demographic change, which may be a factor in older people becoming isolated in such locations;

O. whereas in 2018, 42 % of workplace accidents in the EU involved workers over the age of 45; whereas workplace safety must therefore consider the impact ageing has on the workforce;

P. whereas there are significant differences within individual Member States, both in terms of the composition of the population and of its demographic development;

Q. whereas our food security depends on successful generational renewal in agriculture;

R. whereas the CAP remains the key instrument to support the rural economy and job creation in rural areas;

S. whereas the European Green Deal should tap into the full potential of older generations while moving towards the green and digital transitions;

T. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability and the digital and social exclusion of elderly people in rural areas;

1. Considers that creating opportunities for intergenerational dialogue is important to enrich the social life of older people in rural areas, counteracting the risk of social isolation, and, at the same time, helping younger generations through imparting knowledge of the past and traditional practices to contribute to cultural and heritage preservation, as well as a more cohesive society;

2. Recalls the specific nature of family farming, which blends agricultural activity and family life, with older farmers remaining active beyond the age of retirement;

3. Considers that sustained efforts will still be required from the social partners and the European and national institutions to create a truly positive ‘culture’ of active ageing and non-discriminatory recruitment; stresses the need for measures to involve the
elderly in the development of local economies, facilitating access to public services in order to improve their quality of life;

4. Believes that a new approach to mentorship and partnership must be found to stop a brain drain, as advanced skills become more concentrated in the older segment of the workforce;

5. Recognises the potential of elderly people, including farmers, to become the driving force of a vibrant silver economy in rural areas based on social innovation, inclusive rural communities and a healthier living environment; calls on the Commission to carefully study this potential when building its long-term vision for rural areas and active ageing;

6. Calls on public institutions to promote the creation of a special protection system that takes account of the specific nature of unemployment affecting agricultural workers, owing to the very temporary nature of agricultural seasonal work; points out that this could provide greater security for those who choose to work in agriculture;

7. Points out that an ageing workforce and the lack of generational renewal constitute a more serious issue in agriculture than in other sectors; believes that creating new vocations to enable generational renewal, by ensuring the attractiveness and profitability of professions in the agriculture sector, is key to reversing this trend;

8. Acknowledges that only 11% of all farm holdings in the European Union are run by farmers under the age of 40; calls on the Member States to remove all barriers preventing young farmers from entering the agricultural sector, including the difficulty of gaining access to land; calls, furthermore, on the Member States to promote new ways of collaboration between the generations such as partnerships, share-farming, long-term leasing and other arrangements which could address the lack of land and encourage young people to become farmers;

9. Reiterates that some of the obstacles to generational renewal in agriculture are linked to access to land and farm transfer from one generation to the next; recalls that older farmers, faced with the risk of low pensions, loss of income (including CAP payments) and social exclusion in rural areas post-retirement, tend to remain active and keep their farms longer; underlines, in this context, the need for tailored policy instruments to guarantee smooth farm transitions and active ageing for older farmers in rural communities;

10. Notes that in many Member States national pension systems do not provide retired farmers with sufficient income; regrets the fact that the extension of agricultural activity beyond the legal retirement age, which slows down generational renewal, is often the only way to deal with this situation; stresses that support under the CAP is not intended to replace a pension system;

11. Notes the growing need for highly qualified young professionals in agriculture, especially in the regions, and draws attention to the need to take all measures to

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encourage young people to study agricultural professions, as well as to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from older people to the younger generation;

12. Considers that the forthcoming Green Paper on Ageing and Long-term vision for Rural Areas will need to place particular emphasis on programmes for the active involvement of older people in rural community life;

13. Believes that farm partnerships between older and younger generations are key to deepening intergenerational solidarity, knowledge transfer and mutual learning, which is particularly important for the uptake of new technologies and digital skills in farming;

14. Considers that family workers still represent the vast majority of agricultural labour in Europe, but notes that this type of labour has been steadily declining for years and is expected to decline further in the near future; stresses that the unstoppable rural exodus from certain parts of the Union will lead to rural areas facing economic, social and environmental problems that need more ambitious and coordinated policies;

15. Recalls that elderly people in remote, mountainous and rural areas are more prone to digital and social exclusion, which has been exacerbated by COVID-19;

16. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to carefully focus the Next Generation EU recovery package to help mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on the older generation;

17. Stresses the importance of supporting rural areas in their diversity, encouraging investments in projects that support local economies, including better transport accessibility and digital connectivity; considers it important to recall that maintaining agricultural employment has direct implications for keeping rural economies alive; believes in addition that the challenge faced by all farmers in understanding the role of, and engaging with, modern technology and innovation in agriculture should not be underestimated; stresses therefore the importance of lifelong vocational training, advisory services and knowledge exchange, both within and outside the framework of the CAP;

18. Considers that access to farming for women should be facilitated through appropriate public services, enabling them to work in agriculture to a greater extent;

19. Notes that an ageing population, particularly in agricultural and rural areas, is an unavoidable trend that must be taken into account when designing economic and social policies; considers that the issue of an ageing population requires a multidimensional approach, and stresses the importance of promoting wider complementarity and synergy between policy areas and support instruments; recalls that adequate resources and services are essential to provide older people with an age-friendly environment;

20. Calls on national, regional and local authorities to consider introducing or supporting programmes for preserving the knowledge of their elderly local populations in order to document and record the intangible cultural heritage linked to local food, recipes, products and other customs, which, in turn, can be used to develop and sustain local livelihoods, products and tourism;
21. Considers that the EU’s green and digital transition should harness the full potential of ageing rural communities; recalls, in this regard, the importance of ensuring access to broadband internet and basic services in rural areas, the uptake of e-skills and new approaches to sustainable development, such as the concept of smart villages and sustainable food system transformation;

22. Recognises the prominent role that cohesion policy and the CAP could play in encouraging and boosting the employability and inclusion of women in rural and remote areas confronted with demographic-related issues, and calls on the Member States to better use the relevant funds for that purpose;

23. Emphasises that inequalities in access to land, direct payments and support, both between and within EU countries, are among the issues that need to be addressed in order to halt regional decline, and to encourage older people past retirement age to leave farming and young people to start farming;

24. Notes that improving the connectivity and accessibility of services in rural and remote areas is crucial to addressing the depopulation of these regions and the social and digital exclusion of the older population living there; calls, therefore, on the Member States to recognise the significance of rural and remote areas in all their diversity, and to develop their potential through stimulating investments in the local economy, fostering entrepreneurship and improving their infrastructure;

25. Calls on the Member States to take into account the proportion of elderly people (over the age of 65) in rural regions when devising their strategic plans, and to consider introducing measures that cover or target elderly inhabitants of rural areas, for example through a more flexible approach to the conditions applicable to real and active participation by that age group in the economic life of the region concerned;

26. Points out that, in the light of the situation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to commit to a living and dynamic countryside, eliminating red tape and investing in infrastructure and quality services in rural areas in order to curb the ageing process in agriculture and promote the role of women as heads of holdings;

27. Highlights the role of the European structural and investment funds, in combination with other EU funds, in addressing the demographic challenges in rural areas, namely through the promotion of economic development and social inclusion;

28. Draws attention to the importance of ensuring the availability of services in the regions, as their decline is encouraging older people to retire earlier and move to cities where these services are easily accessible;

29. Considers the openings created by lifelong learning, in combination with digitalisation, essential to provide the ageing population in rural and remote areas with various opportunities, including supplementary income; calls, therefore, on the Commission and the Member States to support education and training programs that will help the ageing population to develop skills and gain expertise in areas such as e-commerce, online marketing and ICT;

30. Notes that an effective mobility system is one of the prerequisites for regional economic
development, territorial cohesion and the development of regional potential; points out that it is therefore necessary to provide the requisite funding for the development and maintenance of transport links, which could encourage the older generation to stay in agriculture for longer and attract young people from regional centres to work in the countryside;

31. Highlights the role and importance of the CAP in encouraging generational renewal in the agricultural sector; calls on the Member States to favour actions to increase the numbers of young farmers in their strategic plans and to promote coherence with other instruments available at national and EU level;

32. Highlights that as a result of the evolution, digitalisation and specialisation of agriculture, both people within the sector and those in the process of entering into it, require an appropriate level of digital, technical and economic training, and calls for the promotion of exchange schemes, discussions, online training courses and e-learning;

33. Highlights the central role played by community-led local development initiatives in restoring and keeping living and thriving local rural economies, and the need to keep a sufficient level of funding for the LEADER programme; calls on the Member states to make full use of LEADER’s capacities;

34. Recalls that the outermost regions are especially predisposed to depopulation and require a special set of measures to mitigate the negative demographic changes they often face; calls on the Member States to use the available structural and investment funds proactively in order to address the challenges these regions face;

35. Underlines the essential impact that constantly evolving digital technologies have on people’s daily lives, and stresses, therefore, the need for high-speed broadband and vital and up-to-date technological equipment in schools, hospitals and all other relevant public services facilities, including developing effective e-governance, in order to ensure there are enough opportunities for people living in rural and remote areas;

36. Notes the importance of the services provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially for the elderly; calls for the strengthening of funding for the activities of NGOs in the regions.
## INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

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<td><strong>Substitutes present for the final vote</strong></td>
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### FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

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**Key to symbols:**
- **+**: in favour
- **-**: against
- **0**: abstention