The elderly: prosperity and intergenerational solidarity

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PURPOSE : to promote prosperity and intergenerational solidarity. CONTENT : this Communication "Towards a Europe for all Ages" constitutes the contribution of the Commission to the UN International Year of the Older Persons. It aims to stimulate debate between and with the Member States. It sets out the implications of the ageing of the population in employment, social protection, health and social services and purposes astrategy for effective policy responses in these fields, based on strengthening co-operation among all actors and solidarity and equity between generations. The challenge to our societies posed by ageing has several dimensions, including : - the relative decline of the population of working age and the ageing of the workforce; - the pressure on pension systems and public finances stemming from a growing number of retired people and a decline in the working age population; - the growing need for old age care and health care. The sharp growth in the number of very old people in need of care will lead to a growing demand on formal care systems. These systems will have to be further developed to cope with the new situation. Simultaneously there should be policies to curtail the growth in dependency through the promotion of healthy ageing, accident prevention and post illness rehabilitation; - a fourth dimension concerns the growing diversity among older people in terms of resources and needs. Policies are required which better reflect the diversity of social situations of older people, i.e. which mobilise better the resources at the disposal of large segments of the older people and which more effectively combat the risks of social exclusion. These dimensions of ageing challenge have led to the following policy conclusions : - in the European Employment Strategy, the European Union has set out to combat unemployment and "to bring about a significant increase in the employment rate of Europe on a lasting basis". The low employment rate of older workers has been identified as an important factor and Member States have been invited to develop measures aimed at maintaining workers' capacities, promoting life-long learning and flexible working arrangements, as well as reviewing tax and benefit schemes to improve incentives to take up job offers and training opportunities. The Strategy stresses the particular role of the social partners in this regard. The Commission will invite the social partners to reflect on how more emphasis can be given to the age dimension in human resource management; - Social protection policies. In its work programme for 1999 the Commission undertook to develop policies to further modernise and improve social protection. It is envisaged that this could take the form of a Communication on social protection which would propose a new process of cooperation between the Commission and the Member States in this field. Particular attention has to be paid to ways to reverse reverse the trend towards early retirement to explore new forms of gradual retirement and to make pension schemes moresustainable and flexible; - Health policies, old age care and research instruments. The Commission will give special attention to medical and social research related to ageing in the fifthh framework programme for Community research. Furthermore, the Commission will support the Member States in their efforts to develop adequate responses to ageing in health and care through studies of how different systems are working; - Policies against discrimination and social exclusion. The Social Action programme sets out the Commission's intention to explore the possibilities for developing new Community action programmes based on articles 13, 129 and 137 of the TEC as modified in Amsterdam. The European Union will be forced to rethink and change outmoded practices and institutions. The growing number of retired people constitutes a wealth of under-utilised experience and talent. They also create new needs to be met by enterprises, public organisations and NGOs.