Demographic challenges and solidarity between the generations

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Philip BUSHILL-MATTHEWS (EPP-ED /UK) in response to the Commission's Green Paper entitled "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations". On the positive side, the report pointed out that demographic change, which is partly attributable to increased life expectancy, should not just be treated as a problem, but also represents "a positive challenge to societies to engage people in all age groups and to offer opportunities which previously did not exist". However, it warned that economic growth needed to be stepped up and that high unemployment should be reduced in order to counter the adverse consequences of demographic change. It also called for the further development of the existing social models in the EU, the main objective of which should be to ensure participation in society, social security and social solidarity for all, and to encourage the potential of all generations.

MEPs pointed to a number of shortcomings in the Green Paper, such as the failure to systematically incorporate the gender perspective in its analysis, as well as the lack of emphasis on such issues as the healthcare aspects of demographic change, the role of reproductive and sexual health and the rise in infertility, and the growing number of single-parent families.

Given the social and economic challenges resulting from the declining birth rate in much of Europe , MEPs stressed that action should be taken to support motherhood and fatherhood. They pointed to the example of the Scandinavian countries, which had some of the highest fertility rates in Europe , coupled with a high participation of men and women in the labour market. The availability of free or affordable childcare facilities, parental leave opportunities (including for fathers) and the rules on maternity leave were contributory factors. The report called on the Member States to do more to "identify and overcome all obstacles to promoting families", and said that "the improvement of work-life balance for individuals should be a perpetual priority for governments". This could be achieved inter alia through more flexible working hours and combating the "long hours" culture, more equality at the workplace, family-friendlier tax policies, more accessible childcare and dependent-care facilities, promoting thriving local schools, and improving housing policies.

MEPs stressed that demographic change would require new, enhanced educational and social infrastructure for young and elderly people alike, including increased facilities for lifelong learning as well as nursing care and care for the elderly. The report added that "the business case for retaining older workers needs to be made more strongly considering the potential of this group", and that the emphasis should be to encourage and enable people to work longer, including a possible raising of the retirement age. It advocated measures such as mentoring schemes and phased retirement to ensure "knowledge-capture" and avoid the loss of valuable experience from retiring employees.

Turning to immigration policy, the committee said that a balance was needed between the respective rights and responsibilities of migrants and host societies, and that admission mechanisms for non-EU nationals must be managed "effectively and transparently". It warned that immigration in itself would not resolve all the problems associated with demographic change, and that it also created its own challenges.

In conclusion, the report called on the Commission to acknowledge demographic change as a "horizontal task" and to mainstream it in all the EU's activities. The Member States, for their part, were urged to

acknowledge it as a "common challenge" and to decide on a more intensive exchange of views at the Spring European Council about its effects and about proven practices, especially in such areas as active ageing, family living conditions and the balance between working and family life.