



Changing the narrative: The future we want to see. Insights from older generations

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Abstract

Demographic change, a prominent trend in our societies, impacts the labour market, pensions, and the health and care sectors, among others. Concurrently, ageing brings opportunities, as older people actively contribute to society through work, caregiving and knowledge sharing. When looking at demographic change, it is important to consider its intersections with other global trends, such as inequality, climate change and technological advancements, and how this interconnectedness impacts people's daily lives across their lifespan.

This article delves into recent European policy approaches and research on demographic change, pinpointing shortcomings and suggesting initiatives to reshape perceptions of ageing and revise the current narrative of old age. Drawing on insights from AGE Platform Europe, the European advocacy organisation of and for older people, this article highlights the collective advocacy efforts at the European and international levels. These efforts aim to truly embody the European motto 'United in Diversity' and to foster fairer and more resilient societies.

Keywords

Age, Ageing, Demographic change, Narrative, Europe, Policies, Future

Introduction

Demographic change is one of the most significant trends faced by contemporary societies. Its impact stretches from the labour market, where it is shrinking the working-age population; to pensions, where it is resulting in an increasing proportion of retirees relative to the working-age population; and to the care sector, where there is a forecast

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increase in the need for care services, among others. At the same time, the ageing population offers the inestimable potential of older people, who are actively engaged in our societies through paid or voluntary work, informal care, political participation, and the sharing of their skills and knowledge with other generations.

Demographic change, however, does not happen in a vacuum: it connects with other major global trends, such as the widening of inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation, the acceleration of technological change and hyperconnectivity, and the changing nature of work. And it affects people in their daily lives.

This article explores some of the most recent policy tools and research work on demographic change, highlighting the relevant shortcomings and proposing initiatives that are more likely to change the narrative around age and ageing. Based on work carried out by AGE Platform Europe, the article highlights the work of a whole movement of advocates at the European and international levels which aims to translate into practice the European motto ‘United in Diversity’ and to provide an opportunity for Europe to build a fairer and more resilient society.

One toolbox does not fit all: European initiatives on ageing

Europe is and has long been one of the fastest ageing continents in the world. Since the establishment of the European Union, research and policies have been shaped to deal with demographic change, its far-reaching consequences, and its interdependency with other major societal trends and challenges.

The EU and its member states, which share an interest in responding to the impact of demographic change, pool knowledge and resources for the benefit of all Europeans. One of the most recent outcomes of this work is the Demography Toolbox (European Commission 2023).

Released by the European Commission at the end of 2023 to respond to demographic change and its impacts on the EU’s society and economy, the Demography Toolbox is structured around four pillars. These are (1) support for parents through the introduction of work–life balance policies, (2) support for younger generations to access the labour market and affordable housing, (3) support for older generations to promote their autonomy and participation, and (4) the attraction of talent from outside the EU to address labour shortages.

In line with the conclusions of the European Council (2023), the Toolbox seeks to support member states in fine-tuning and coordinating European and national policies that mitigate the impact of demographic change on Europe’s competitiveness. However, in line with its mandate, while the Toolbox takes a stance on economic issues, it misses the opportunity to approach ageing from the perspective of rights and quality of life.

Putting ‘welfare’ above ‘well-being’ hinders the change of paradigm and narrative around demographic change. Furthermore, from the analysis carried out by AGE Platform Europe (2021a), other key tools that have been proposed at the European level to deal with demographic challenges also present some shortcomings.

The Employment Equality Directive (European Council 2000) is meant to protect against age-based discrimination at work. However, more than two decades since its adoption, the Directive is not very effective at preventing stigmatisation and ageism at work. A major hitch is that the Directive leaves it up to the member state to define age limits in employment and vocational training, which results in its heterogeneous application across the EU. Furthermore, the Work–Life Balance Directive (European Parliament and Council 2019) does not duly consider middle-aged informal carers, who are squeezed between work duties and caring responsibilities.

The adoption of the Horizontal Equal Treatment Directive (European Commission 2008) would be key to banning age discrimination in all areas of society, looking beyond the employment sector. Unfortunately, progress on this draft directive has not advanced, and has been blocked by member states since 2008, despite longstanding lobbying efforts by civil society organisations.

Alongside these Directives and other acts and policies, the European Commission carries out wide-ranging research and academic work on demographic change, conscious of how research and innovation can support the flexibility and responsive capacity of stakeholders in crisis periods. This helps, for instance, by informing policy development and decision-making on enhancing resilience and preparedness for future events.

Among the relevant projects financed by the Commission's Horizon Europe Programme, the Futuresilience and FutuRes projects are worth mentioning. The first facilitates the fast and effective use of policy research findings through 10 selected pilot case studies called 'Future Resilience Labs'. The aim of the project is to develop innovative tools with which the EU can foster resilience, including a knowledge base, a toolbox and a policy roadmap.

The latter, FutuRes—Towards a Resilient Future for Europe, aims to identify the demographic policies that will be needed in the future and how they can be improved to ensure that people of all ages will be better equipped to face various kinds of crises and unexpected shocks. In adopting a life-course perspective and studying resilience across many countries and populations, FutuRes works to prepare society for future challenges, both at an individual level (e.g. unexpected exposure to unemployment, illness or loneliness) and at a societal level (e.g. inflation, mass migration or natural catastrophes). FutuRes research combines population data with economic modelling and innovative foresight methods to formulate future scenarios to support policymakers. FutuRes is designing a platform through which decision-makers from research, politics, business and civil society can engage and work closely together to produce evidence-informed solutions, suitable for all generations.

Despite the many initiatives and progress throughout the decades, Europe still lacks a comprehensive paradigm on age and ageing. The good news is that such a paradigm has already been drafted, and some initiatives are becoming more and more prominent in the European landscape.

Changing the narrative around ageing

We age from the day we are born, and we have all changed since that day. But in contrast to what happens to us when ageing, our human rights do not change based on how old we are. Despite this, ageism, that is, discrimination on the grounds of age, is a reality we often face, and one that poses a threat to our ability to fully exercise our rights as we grow older.

Ageism impacts the way we think of (stereotypes), feel about (prejudice) and act towards (discrimination) others or ourselves according to age. It affects people of all ages around the globe and prevents the enjoyment of our human rights across our lifetimes. Ageism is associated with earlier death, with a lower quality of life, and with poorer physical and mental health, including the onset of depression. Moreover, it increases risky health behaviours (e.g. eating an unhealthy diet, smoking), social isolation and loneliness (WHO 2021). Ageism furthermore pits generations against each other, with the old discriminating against the young and vice versa. It also intersects with gender, race, disability and so on, creating specific forms of multiple discrimination, such as against older women, or older people with disabilities.

How to combat ageism? It is necessary to change the narrative around ageing, to unveil and correct discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes based on age. The 194 member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) have requested that the organisation works across sectors and stakeholder groups to set up and implement a global campaign to combat ageism (WHO n.d.). This campaign aims to build a world for all ages; to raise awareness of ageism, highlighting the risks it brings; and to show how policies can cope with and dismantle ageism by changing how we all think, feel and act with regard to age and ageing.

At the European level, 2019 marked the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and AGE Platform Europe conceived and ran a 70-day global campaign against ageism. Called Ageing Equal, this online campaign was the first Europe-wide effort to raise awareness that ‘human rights do not diminish with age’ (AGE Platform Europe 2018). Still available, with content and testimonies, the Ageing Equal (n.d.) website calls for equal rights for all ages and raises awareness of the harmful consequences of ageism.

More recently, the Age Without Limits (n.d.) campaign, by the Centre for Better Ageing, aims to change the way we all think about ageing and underpins a growing movement of people and organisations working to make society more age-inclusive. Since 2023 this campaign has boosted the positive depiction of later life, making available the first free library with positive and realistic portrayals of older people, and has challenged everyday ageism through the production of a dedicated guide.

From awareness-raising among European citizens to awareness-raising among European policymakers, many actions can be taken. In its EU Strategy for Age Equality,

AGE Platform Europe (2021b) goes the extra mile to sensitise European institutions to ageism and drafts age-inclusive policies that would benefit both younger and older generations.

Towards age equality in Europe

The European goal of achieving a ‘Union of Equality’ (European Commission n.d.) cannot be reached unless the narrative around ageing embraces equality and human rights from a life-course perspective, that is, from the cradle to the grave. To effectively cope with the challenges of demographic change, discrimination must be eradicated, and space given to equality. The topic of ageing should be mainstreamed, and equality and human rights at all ages should be advanced across many areas, starting with equal access to essential services, the opportunity to age in a healthy way, sustainable and high-quality working lives, adequate pensions, an old-age minimum income, and protection against all forms of abuse and violence.

This is a clear call to action for the European institutions, and a much-needed one in these uncertain times: this is a moment when solidarity and resilience must be strongly cultivated to allow the European population to remain united in its diversity. However, a few months ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, the EU seems to be struggling to find balance and unity. Elections are divisive moments in many countries, with competing ideologies, values and claims being debated. Differences in political beliefs, socio-economic perspectives, cultural values and ideas of the future, among others, can trigger divisions. At the European level, such divisions are echoed and sometimes magnified, making the search for unity a real battle.

Achieving a Union of Equality requires ongoing collaboration, vision, strategy and commitment among and across the member states. It requires ensuring age equality; gender equality; and equal opportunities in education, healthcare and employment. It is also a matter of rule of law and democracy, upholding democratic values and protecting human rights.

The next European legislature would benefit hugely from a European Parliament Intergroup that supports a human rights-based approach to age and ageing, and that gives voice to tangible proposals regarding ageing in the areas of health care, employment, social protection and inclusion, digitalisation and the environment, among others. By utilising the EU Strategy on Age Equality proposed by AGE Platform Europe, the European Parliament Intergroup could maximise its efforts and count on clear guidelines for a more inclusive and egalitarian EU.

Furthermore, AGE Platform Europe works with its members and allies to ensure that both current and future older generations are valued and respected across their lifetimes, regardless of people’s abilities and needs. In collaboration with the European Youth Forum, AGE Platform Europe calls for an intergenerational dialogue and exchange of cultural, professional and technological knowledge and skills between younger and older

people, as highlighted in their joint declaration (AGE Platform Europe and European Youth Forum 2023).

While respecting and celebrating diversity, there is also a need for consistency and coherency in policies and practices across the EU. These are crucial to ensuring equal treatment, fostering solidarity, and maintaining the integrity of the single market and other shared institutions. With a new European Commission on the horizon, AGE Platform Europe is working closely with various Directorate-Generals within the European Commission to mainstream age equality and ensure the effective coordination of policies and services.

Ageing, globally

Across the EU, age discrimination remains one of the most pervasive forms of unequal treatment, with over 45% of individuals believing that age discrimination is widespread in their country (Eurobarometer 2023). Globally, one in two people are ageist towards older people (WHO 2021). In the EU, age discrimination is the most socially accepted and the least legally protected characteristic, because of both the lack of an adequate legal and policy framework, and the varying interpretations of the exemption clauses included in the existing and proposed EU non-discrimination legislation. One of the beacon organisations in the field of human rights and ageing at the international level is the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP). Established in 2011 on the initiative of nine organisations¹ with the aim of strengthening the rights and voices of older people globally, today GAROP has over 400 organisational members worldwide, supporting civil society engagement with member states and human rights institutions at the national, regional and international levels around a proposed UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

GAROP is holding a global conversation with citizens across the globe to design the future we want. To mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the UN, GAROP organised a far-reaching international debate and gathered views on people's priorities, challenges and solutions to bridge current gaps and cope with future risks. One of the recommendations that emerged from this consultation was that governments should take steps to progress the writing of the above-mentioned proposed UN Convention. This important outcome underlines the urgent need for a change of narrative, explicitly recognising older people in international human rights laws, and legally binding and making governments accountable for fulfilling the rights of all people across the life-course.

As ageism and age discrimination can result in a violation of people's rights that knows no boundaries, the world needs an international instrument to ensure our rights as we grow older. With the EU and its member states being global leaders in the defence and promotion of human rights (AGE Platform Europe 2022), the next European Commission should lead the calls for the establishment of the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. 'To date no international human rights treaty has been adopted without the support of European states. The ongoing debate about the feasibility of a new

UN convention allows the EU to demonstrate in practice its leadership to ensuring equal respect of everyone's rights at all ages' (AGE Platform Europe 2022).

Conclusions: embracing age equality in Europe

The challenges brought about by demographic change require Europe to recognise the diversity of ageing across society and its intersection with other societal trends. Initiatives such as the European Commission's Demography Toolbox and the advocacy work of AGE Platform Europe highlight the need for comprehensive policy responses to address age-related challenges and to prioritise equality across all ages and policies.

As Europe faces a period of internal and external tensions, and is confronted by many global crises (war, climate change, the energy crisis, migration etc.), fostering unity and solidarity becomes paramount. Achieving a Union of Equality requires collaborative efforts across the member states, grounded in democratic values and human rights principles.

Looking ahead, the next European Commission must seize the opportunity to lead on age equality, both domestically and internationally. By championing initiatives such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, Europe can reaffirm its commitment to human rights and set a global precedent for age equality.

Note

1. GAROP was founded through the efforts of the following organisations: International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, International Longevity Centre – Global Alliance, International Federation on Ageing, International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, HelpAge International, AGE Platform Europe, Age UK and AARP – The American Association of Retired Persons.

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