

Central Bohemia Region



Mecklenburg  
Vorpommern



## Joint Declaration of European Regions:

“Facing  
demographic  
change as a  
regional  
challenge”



Brussels  
October 2006



SACHSEN-ANHALT



Liberec  
Region

## **Demographic change as regional challenge**

Demographic change is an important issue for many European regions. Prompted by ageing societies and an increasing emigration of young people, many regions will be confronted with serious problems in the medium to long term. In the face of this challenge, we European regions have come together to address the problem jointly.

Some regions are tackling this demographic dilemma by encouraging the immigration of workers (both from the EU Member States and from third countries). However for some regions in economic decline, it is not possible to attract these workers. For these regions, the demographic change caused by the decrease in the birth rate, the emigration of highly qualified workers as well as the ageing population, is developing at an even more worrying pace.

These regions are not, however, an exception. They are merely going through a process that will affect the majority of European regions over the next 50 years. We want to work together as a network in tackling this problem from the outset so that our experiences and solutions can be used as examples of best practise throughout the EU. We intend to develop a structured dialogue with the Commission and the European Parliament about regional challenges and approaches we are taking as a result of demographic change.

In our opinion, the most pressing challenges currently facing our regions include: the continuing provision of high quality public services to an ageing population, the economic challenges posed by the steady loss of young graduates and workers, and the consequence of demographic change on urban development.

**Therefore, in view of the European dimension of these challenges, we strongly urge the European Union:**

1. To consider the concept of sustainability not only in regard to environmental resources but also in regard to demographics, particularly in the future EU funding programmes. All future EU policy and funding programmes should be reviewed in light of this definition with a particular focus on ensuring the provision of infrastructure and in promoting economic growth in line with the Lisbon Strategy. In this way we ask that the issue of demographic change be mainstreamed in all EU policy fields, including those where it would at first appear to have little relevance such as internal market, services of general interest and competition policy.

2. To request that Member States and regions develop regional strategies in their Structural Fund Operational Programs that recognise and address sub-regional differences. Existing strategies for economic growth are often irrelevant to areas of a region that are in demographic decline. For some regions or sub-regions it may be unrealistic to orientate objectives purely towards growth. In some cases, decline and consolidation as a base of planning must also be accepted. We ask that the EU acknowledge this fact and work with European regions in order to address the issue.

3. To develop new benchmarking systems and indicators which accurately reflect the challenge of demographic change. The existing quantitative indicators which are used to assess the impact of European funding (such as number of jobs created, kilometres of roads built) are not relevant in areas that are suffering from severe demographic decline. In order to be able to effectively address to the unique problems facing these regions (such as urban renewal, provision of public services, rural development) we argue that more flexible support and assessment mechanisms are needed, particularly in Structural Fund management.

4. To acknowledge that a declining population will result in a corresponding decline in population density. This in turn has important consequences for both social and material infrastructure. This problem is particularly pertinent in rural areas which already often have difficulties in ensuring the provision of adequate public services.

5. To recognise that the decrease in the working age population impacts on the finances of local and regional authorities. The concept of additionality which is highlighted in the General Structural Funds Regulations should be interpreted in accordance with this.

6. To pay more regard to the opportunities presented by the over 50s as an increasing source of labour supply. These people could be a key contributor to maintaining economic growth which offsets the reduction in younger workers.

7. To recognise the fact, that an active professional and social life of the elderly extends the expected lifetime without disability and allows the maintenance of independence. This has a important influence on national social policy and the demand for medical services.

8. To consider that changes in the health of the population, especially connected with the increasing number of people of retirement age and existing epidemiological trends, will have an effect on the regional evolution in the hierarchy of health requirements and needs. The health service sector needs to adapt to real health demands, including in some cases reorganisation of public health care. Those actions will help assure the maintenance of high quality in health care and the good level of health of the citizens. In regions with most critical indicators concerning the range of chronic diseases, above-average mortality, injuries, accidents and disability, this will require support and assistance from the EU.

**We, the regions, highlight the following approaches that are needed in order to deal effectively with demographic change at the European level:**

1. The phenomenon of young people emigrating from poorly performing regions can be tackled through the promotion of economic growth. Existing core areas of economic growth must be supported in order to ensure the adequate provision of high quality jobs. Investment in human capital is essential in order to create a flexible and adaptable workforce. Thus, investment in lifelong learning for employees of all ages should be encouraged.

2. The potential, knowledge and experience in the workforce of the over 50s should be better explored in view of demographic change. This requires the prevention of age discrimination in all employment and action in order to overcome existing barriers. In achieving this the behaviour of employers will be key. Significant attitude changes towards older workers and changes to employment practices need therefore to be encouraged. At the same time, older workers need to be incited to return or be retained in employment or self employment or encouraged into business start ups.

3. A key factor in addressing the challenge of demographic change lies in the qualitative aspects of daily life. Young people must be encouraged to stay in or move to seek work in the regions and to raise a family there. In order to promote this, regions must invest in developing quality of life factors such as work-life balance, childcare, improving the environment and social support mechanisms.

4. The infrastructure problems caused by stagnating and shrinking regional economies and the ageing of or reduction in the population must also be addressed. This includes the recognition that uniform standards throughout the EU are not necessary in the best interests of the regions. Strategies must be adapted to best meet the strengths and weaknesses of the European regions.

5. The spatial proximity between growing, stagnating and shrinking sub-regions requires flexible solutions to be adopted to deal with the specificities of the sub-region. The cooperation between growing regions, especially Metropolitan regions, and the surrounding rural areas should be intensified.

6. As mentioned in the introduction, a partial solution for some regions in demographic decline has been found in the encouragement of immigration from outside the EU. This however can cause its own problems and we strongly suggest improvement of measures to improve the integration of immigrants.

7. Ensuring a healthy life start for newborn babies as well as small children is a special challenge for the EU countries and regions in the age of constantly diminishing birth rates. A high priority for the EU should be support for women and children's health. A broad network of services, starting from family planning and pre- and post-natal care, protective vaccinations, to appropriate medical services for children is an important long-term, multi-generational investment for the social and economic prosperity of families.