

# Live a Good, Long Life



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**In Poland, like in many European countries, the age structure of the population is changing: the number of individuals above 60 years old is rising while the number of children and youth is dropping. Our reaction to this process should aim not just to reform the system of social insurance and the labor market, but also to change people's behavior on the individual level**

“Population aging” is a process of change in the age composition of the population, i.e. an increase in the numbers of elderly individuals (and the percentage of the population

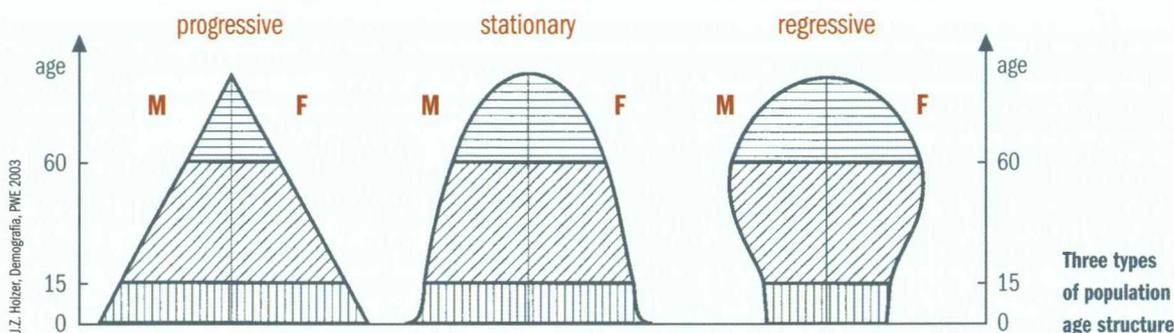
they account for), often with an attendant drop in the number of children and young people (and the percentage of the population they account for). Elderly individuals may here be defined as individuals aged 60 and above (or 65 and above), while the group of children and youth may be defined as those aged 0-15 or 0-17. The process of population aging is attracting more and more attention from researchers these days, and is likewise increasingly becoming a point of public debate. Such public discussion, however, often incorporates certain misunderstandings stemming from several causes. Firstly, there is a general misunderstanding of the nature of the demographic changes which underpin the population aging phenomenon. Secondly, the population structure shift process is widely equated with the consequences of such a shift. Another problem is that discussion of both the process itself and its consequences does not sufficiently distinguish between the individual perspective and the macro-scale perspective. In this article I will try to clear up these mis-

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**In Poland, like in many developed Western European countries, the numbers of individuals aged 60 and older (and the percentage of the population they represent) are on the rise. This is a consequence of longer life expectancies on the one hand, and the drop in the fertility rate on the other**



## Types of population age structure



understandings in order to justify my view that population aging does not itself pose a threat - rather, the threat lies in the lack of understanding of what this process entails and what significance it has for individuals, for the economy and society, and what processes of adaptation are necessary.

### Growing older

Population aging is an irreversible problem of a global nature, stemming chiefly from a drop in the fertility rate and from the prolongation of human lifetimes. Within a given timeframe, the speed of population aging depends on these two factors as well as on higher and lower birth rates seen in earlier periods and foreign migrations. The constant growth seen in the numbers (and percentage) of individuals aged 60 (or 65) and above is immanently linked to the alterations in human reproduction behavior which accompany the processes of modernization. They involve a shift from the traditional type of reproduction, characterized by high fertility and death rates, towards modern reproduction characterized by low fertility and mortality. That shift becomes reflected the population age structure: moving from what is called a progressive structure, illustrated here as a pyramid with a broad base and a narrow top, to a regressive structure, with a narrow base and a broad top.

Population aging is therefore a predictable consequence of changes in the process of replenishing the human population, yet its intensity took many researchers by surprise. Europe, in particular, has seen an acceleration in the population aging process.

Demographic changes leading to the emergence of a new demographic order have been underway for the past 40 years in

European countries with a developed market economy, and for some 15 years in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. These changes above all affect the process of family formation and dissolution, as a consequence of which: the total fertility rate consistently remains below the replacement level, there is a lower propensity to form a family and get married and decisions about marriage and having a child are made at later age, informal relationships become increasingly popular, and marriages relatively frequently end in divorce. Persistent low total fertility rates, in many countries below 1.35 children per woman of childbearing age, a level considered very low, plus the prolonged human lifetimes seen nowadays are gradually weakening Europe's population dynamics and leading to the rapid aging of its population. That will entail a new demographic situation in the future.

### Debate over the new demographic regime

This acceleration in European population aging sparked increased interest in the 1990s in what the economic and social impact of the process would be, with particular concern for the solvency of "pipeline" pension systems, financed from the contributions paid in by individuals currently working. A rising awareness of this new demographic order in Europe, taking account of the long-term prospects for shifts in the ratios between the basic age groups (i.e. 0-15 or 0-17, 15/17-60/65, and 60 or 65 and above), has made population dynamics an important element in public debate about how the economy and society must be adapted in the future. Such debate has also noted that the labor force is also growing older. Moreover, Europe is the only continent that

## Demographic changes in Poland

is experiencing a reduction in the number of individuals of working age, a phenomenon that will encompass nearly 90% of European countries by 2030.

However, such greater awareness of the irreversibility of the population aging process and its global character does not mean that the underlying causes of the process and its consequences are well-known and properly perceived – by researchers or by various participants in the economic and social system.

Firstly, the consequences of this process are predominantly perceived in negative terms, e.g. the threats facing the public finance system, the economy's waning innovativeness and competitiveness, mounting costs of health care and social aid, rising numbers of elderly individuals in need of care, etc. Attention is focused on the huge drop in the size of the labor force.

Secondly, the process is predominantly approached from an economic standpoint, meaning that reforms of the social insurance system and labor market are seen to be of key significance. Such an approach underestimates the importance of family structure shifts that diminish kin networks, which form a kind of "natural resource" of support for elderly individuals. Moreover, shifts in value systems, especially burgeoning individualism, can diminish the sense of

responsibility felt by children or grandchildren for taking care of their elderly relatives, at the same time as demand for support of that sort is on the rise. Because of this asymmetry in how the direct economic vs. social consequences are perceived, relatively little attention gets devoted to the question of how to foster such intergenerational responsibility for elderly individuals, both within and without the family. This involves perceiving elderly individuals as a socially important value (rather than as a burden) as well as implementing responsible measures to encourage the family to perform its care-taking functions.

Thirdly, population age dynamics and the need to react are perceived chiefly on the macro scale. It is above all national governments, pressured by experts, who react by undertaking reforms of the social insurance system, labor market policy, and the system of healthcare or caretaking services. Other economic and social actors (employers, trade unions, local authorities, NGOs, and citizens) are not involved enough in this process.

### Processes of adaptation

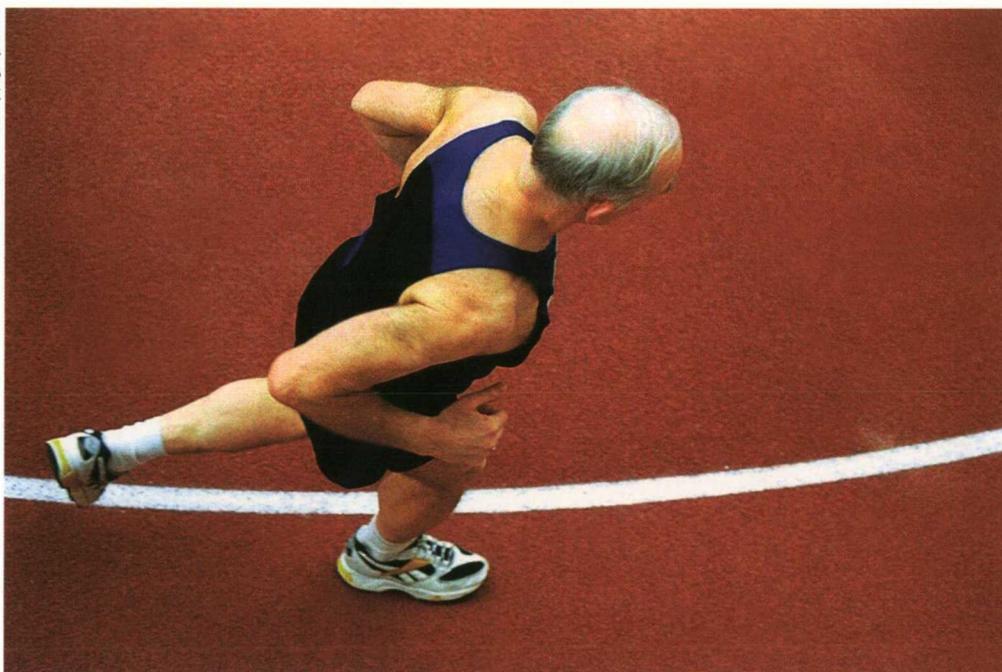
From the standpoint of the individual, the prolongation of human life expectancies is an undoubted triumph of civilization. This is true not just on the individual level but also on the intergenerational level, as subsequent



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Research in Poland has evidenced a relatively strong conviction that elderly individuals constitute a resource of social capital – important for the life of the family and society – rather than a burden

Kuba Alys/Agencia Gazeta



The prolongation of human life expectancies should be accompanied by changes in people's individual behaviors and lifestyles

generations thereby gain a greater chance of coexisting. However, there is a lack of coherence between the individual-scale impact of this process and its macro-scale impact. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehension about what adaptations are necessary on the individual level to prepare for a longer lifespan (professional activity, lifelong learning, caring for one's own health and physical shape, ensuring one's own financial resources for old age, etc.)

Research conducted in Poland shows that 65% of those surveyed take a negative view of the rising numbers of elderly individuals. At the same time, there is a relatively strong conviction that elderly individuals make a positive contribution to social and family life. It is my view that this negative assessment of the rising numbers of elderly individuals is strongly influenced by the fact that public discussion chiefly focuses on the economic consequences of the aging processes, portrayed in terms of the costs and burden to the economy and society. But despite that, treatment of elderly individuals as a kind of social resource is especially strongly rooted in the Polish social perception, much as it is in Slovenia or Lithuania: this same study showed that the largest group, a total of 69% of those surveyed, advocated the view that elderly individuals should be perceived as social capital, while at the same time the

opposing view that the elderly are a burden to society was decidedly shared by 11% of respondents. In turn, 20% of those surveyed were opposed to elderly individuals being seen as a resource of social capital.

Another paradox lies in preferences for retirement before the standard age in spite of the prolongation of the life expectancy. In the same study, as many as 70% of Poles below 55 years of age were in favor of retiring before they reached 60 years old. At the same time, in Poland, like in many other countries, the notion of raising the retirement age in order to guarantee future benefit payments for elderly individuals has not gained acceptance.

There is therefore a lack of understanding that living longer lives also requires adaptations on the individual level, including by increasing the employment-to-leisure ratio. ■

#### Further reading:

- Bijak J., Kupiszewska D., Kupiszewski M., Saczuk K., Kicingier A. (2007). Population and labour force projections for 27 European countries, 2002–2052: impact of international migration on population ageing. *European Journal of Population*, 23, 1–31.
- Abramowska A., Balcerzak-Paradowska B., Kotowska I.E. (Ed.), Kowalska I., Muszyńska M., Wróblewska W. (2003). *Population policy - objectives, solutions, opinions* [in Polish]. Warsaw: SGH.
- Replacement migration: is it a solution to declining and ageing populations?* (2000). New York: United Nations Population Division.