

Addressing long-term challenges such as population ageing and climate change

What is the topic about?

The European Union (EU) does not only manage sudden crises, such as COVID-19 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine; it also responds to long-term changes such as climate change and demographic change. These policy areas are subject to much scaremongering but also have real, and high, stakes: even if birthrates soared and carbon emissions were to drop to zero tomorrow, the financing of welfare states and the temperature of the planet would remain on their current trajectories for decades.

The first challenge is therefore to understand the real problems and actions that can be taken now. The second is not just what to do about challenges such as demographic change and climate change, but also how to build resilience so that the EU can identify new challenges and start to act on them, ideally before they manifest as crises.

Why is it important to EU Member States?

The importance of climate change should be clear as we survey a landscape of increasingly destructive weather (storms, floods) and fire events, heat waves and weather instability. Health policy faces two kinds of challenges. The first challenge is mitigation, including the reduction of the carbon footprint of health systems and the most rapid move possible to zero or negative carbon emissions. Health care is an important contributor to Europe's carbon footprint and net zero is unattainable without health policy and investment. The other is adaptation, from installing climate control in hospitals that had never previously needed it, to preparing for an increase in infectious diseases, including zoonoses, water and food-borne and vector-borne diseases in places where they had been absent or long eradicated. Adaptation also requires meeting the challenge of rising non-communicable conditions, such as respiratory conditions associated with air pollution, and preparing for the casualties and disruptions of increasingly frequent climate change disasters as different as heat waves and floods.

The importance of ageing is less obvious and often misunderstood. Member States' choices for economic and welfare policies depend on the accurate understanding

of the issue. Ageing societies do not necessarily have significantly higher health care costs for a variety of reasons. They might have higher pension costs, but they might also benefit from the unpaid labour of older people and contributions from pensioners in ways not captured by economic statistics.

The problem is not a simple one of fewer workers and more pensioners, but a complex one involving productivity across the life course, paid and unpaid labour, caring, migration and healthy ageing.

Lastly, there are important interlinkages between the two challenges. Marginalized and vulnerable populations, including older persons, are particularly at risk of suffering the effects of extreme weather events and may have more limited capacities to adapt to meet such challenges. At the same time, demographic changes have important implications for global consumption and emission patterns impacting on the environment and accelerating climate change.

What has the EU done to date?

The European Union has an enormous political and practical investment in climate change policy, ranging from its ambitious Green Deal to its funding instruments, which offer financing through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (37% of Member States' allocated budgets are required to contribute towards green measures, including in health systems), the LIFE programme, and the Just Transition Fund, to name just a few. In addition, the Technical Support Instrument managed by the Directorate General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) can offer advisory and technical support in this area. Relatedly, the launch of a recent Horizon Europe call for research and innovation activities contributing towards "ensuring access to innovative, sustainable and high-quality health care" further highlights the progressive emergence of targeted investment in greening health systems for the future. Opportunities targeting both climate mitigation and adaptation measures in the context of health and health systems should continue to be potentiated to support Member States in building climate resilience.

For ageing, the EU pursues relevant initiatives along various policy arms, including social and employment policy, education and health care. Anchored within the European Pillar of Social Rights, this foresees actions to support Member States with promoting life-long learning, providing adequate long-term care, and ensuring financial protection in old age. Through the European Semester process, the European Commission monitors Member States' economic and fiscal policies over time and makes targeted policy recommendations to support the financial sustainability of European economies, including social welfare. Beyond supporting relevant initiatives such as the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing and the Healthier Together Initiative, it also produces relevant publications like the Green Paper on Ageing, and periodic ageing reports to project the possible effects of demographic changes across the Union. In the sphere of health and social care, relevant funding opportunities exist through instruments such as EU4Health (the EU's health programme), Erasmus+ (focusing on education and social inclusion), the European Social Fund + and Horizon Europe.

Other policy areas that are important and outside core European competencies also play a role, notably border and migration policy. The workforce shortage in health care (see briefing paper on "Enhancing the labour market for health and care workers") is just one example of how labour markets, demographics and migration interact with outcomes that range from positive to very negative.

Key takeaways

- The EU has distinctive tools that can complement Member States as they address the challenges of climate change and demographic change.
- Health care systems face the twin challenge of stopping further climate change through a transition to net-zero or net-negative carbon emissions while also mitigating the impact of climate change on health and health systems.
- Ageing is not a problem for health care systems unless policy makes it a problem. The actual challenge is to adopt life-course centred policies that enable people at every age to productively engage in society and the economy, and health care plays a role at every stage.
- Building resilient health care systems that can survive and come back better from predictable and unpredictable shocks will be increasingly important as climate change produces more novel crises that affect health.

Further reading

Cylus, J., Figueras, J. and Normand, C., 2019. Will population ageing spell the end of the welfare state? A review of evidence and policy options.

SL Greer, S., F Lynch, J., Reeves, A., Raj, M., Gingrich, J., Falkenbach, M., Cylus, J. and Bambra, C., 2022. The politics of healthy ageing: myths and realities.

European Commission. A European Green Deal. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024a/european-green-deal_en

European Commission. New European green funding guide to support zero pollution, 2022. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/new-guide-eu-funding-programmes-environment-2022-08-17_en

Deuster, C. et al; Demography and climate change, EUR 31512 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023, doi:10.2760/26411, JRC133580.

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