

## THE DEMOGRAPHIC AND BEHAVIOURAL DIMENSION

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The purpose of this brief is to identify a range of demographic and behavioural aspects which might feature in the Academy's discussions on what could prove to be one of the defining issues of the 21st century. In what follows, I have put a number of propositions – some are no more than conjectures, others are factual statements – to enable us to focus on the main topic and its major determinants: science, economics and society.

1. The first scenario that has to be noted is the increasing burden of economic and social dependency arising from existing demographic trends: rapidly declining fertility together with increasing longevity in most developing countries as a force likely to undermine intergenerational solidarity. The spectre of ageing and consequential increase of the dependency burden falling on the proportionately reduced cohorts of young taxpayers defines the parameters of battles between the young and the old. This will dominate politics in the same way as the battles between the workers and bosses, rich and poor, did in the past.

The developing countries with their high fertility statistics will not be spared the clash, although given the age distribution it may come somewhat later. Here science combined with the better diet is gradually making just about everyone, outside the AIDS-affected areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, live longer. With every decade that the age of death recedes and the fertility rate (largely for social and economic reasons, helped by technology) declines, so the same problem will arise as in affluent, developed countries: a large group of elderly needing some form of assistance and health care, supported by a smaller group of younger workers paying taxes. Unless these countries are then much richer, the pain imposed by the demographic imbalance is likely to be more severe than in the affluent West.

Throughout the developing world the volatile mix of demography, science and society is likely to dominate the coming decades. The industrial and social change will shift millions into cities in search for work and better living conditions. One is tempted to speculate about such conditions as a fertile ground for the rise of terrorism.

2. The scenario of conflict and unrest rooted in demographic imbalance might well be corrected initially in developed countries of the West – by a recent trend which like the ageing population structure is also a change brought about by economics, science and society in the affluent West: paradoxically even as the old have become more numerous so opportunities for the young have been proliferating thus lessening inter-generational tensions.

Certainly in the last two decades industrial organizations and even societies have become less hierarchical. Seniority counts for less, initiative and creativity for more. Such striking advances in technology that produced the internet boom provide extra rewards to those with flexible minds and the balance shifts sharply towards the young. In these circumstances the line between young and age could become blurred, hence the demographic factor alone need not necessarily undermine inter-generational solidarity. Here medical science is the factor at work: people feel young and look young for far longer than in the past. That trend ought in time to ease the conventional worries about too many pensions and too few youthful workers. The line between work and retirement ought to fade as more people choose to carry on working (part-time or even full-time) into their old age. But this implies the need for a change in pension schemes and hours of work. In the long term, the potentially divisive problem of an unequal tax burden might lessen the degree and intensity of intergenerational conflict.

3. The optimistic scenario outlined above and its outcomes providing for a measure of solidarity between generations will come to pass only in a world that develops in a benign way. In the long-and short-run the chances of maintaining intergenerational solidarity must depend on a third factor at work: economics or, more precisely, the prospect of growth in a globalized economy. This means, above all else, that the forces generating economic expansion will not continue to be adversely affected by the repetition of such events as the Asian crisis of 1997-98, the downward trend in the US and Japanese business cycles of the past 18 months and, more importantly, by the events of September 11, 2001 and their worldwide repercussions on trade.

We are already witnessing the impact of these adverse developments on developing countries where tension is rising between, on the one hand, people who are young, better educated, more dynamic and therefore likely to find jobs in cities (and if really very lucky to get an immigration visa to a developed country) and, on the other hand, those who are left behind who tend to be older and less enterprising.

Is this scenario – or rather description of the existing state of affairs – to be analyzed in terms of primarily demographic criteria to determine the extent of intergenerational solidarity or conflict? I do not think so because here we are concerned with the capacity of the present system – primarily ‘Western’ in its origin and ideological orientation to conceptualize the problem of poverty. The failure to find answers to certain urgent questions about poverty must raise doubts about the validity of the whole Western system of economics and politics. I quote from Donald Doob *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Dublin 1983, p. 271-2:

– Can international agencies such as the UNCTAD and its offshoots be used more effectively to overcome the imbalances and injustices of the international economic order?

– Will there be a willingness to make the necessary changes in those agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and others which may need to be reformed?

– Is it possible to slow down “the growth imperative” in capitalist society to a level that is environmentally acceptable, without creating large scale unemployment?

– Can the problem of “structural unemployment” be overcome?

The above are only some of many complex issues currently on this Academy’s pluralist agenda. All I wish to suggest is that in carrying forward the debate on intergenerational solidarity we promote at all times the need for dialogue with either of the major systems which dominate the world today.