

DEMOGRAPHICS IN 2020

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As population growth marked the twentieth century, population ageing will mark the twenty-first. By 2020, the average European will have fewer years of life expectancy remaining than years he or she has already lived. East Asians will soon follow. Humankind will spend much of the coming decade grappling with questions about how to organize and pay for the care of an increasing elderly population and about who will produce what the elderly consume.

In the longer term, a return to moderate fertility rates in those countries with very low fertility, and increases in immigration can do much to moderate population ageing. Sweden and Japan face quite different demographic futures, because fertility in Sweden is closer to replacement and a small but steady stream of immigrants will make up the difference. In Japan — the world's leader in longevity — fertility remains low, and immigration a major social challenge.

We need demographic research on four fronts addressing population ageing. Low birth rates can perhaps be increased by measures that reconcile work and family, enabling people to have the children they say they want. Fostering the social and economic integration of immigrants is another priority. Health research, helping people to stay younger longer, is already a priority of ageing societies; indeed, so far, the healthy period of life has been lengthening as fast or faster than life expectancy itself. But now — as the first 65-year-old baby-boomers prepare to blow out their birthday candles — we must address the larger question of rescheduling life's turning points, so that people can remain active and productive. The societies that respond to ageing successfully will be those that take advantage of longer life.