

## **Brain drain – mitigating challenges associated with population decline**

Contribution of the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe to the European Commission Public Consultation

The Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) welcomes the work of the European Commission to improve its cohesion policy in rural areas, especially with regard to brain drain and depopulation. As stated in the [impact assessment](#) of the European Commission, *“Eurostat projects a steady increase in the number of EU regions whose populations are declining. At national level, populations will decline significantly by 2040 compared to 2020 in the following countries: Romania by 2.7 million (-14%), Poland by 2.3 million (-6%), Bulgaria by 0.9 million (-13%), Lithuania by 0.5 million (-16%) and Latvia by 0.4 million (-19%).”*

**European rural areas currently face the interconnected challenges of low fertility rates, brain drain, depopulation and ageing.**

Last year, the European Commission published its long-awaited [Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#), which identified the lower attractiveness of rural areas compared to cities as key element of explanation for its demographic challenges. Indeed, rural areas tend to have lower access to quality education, including the absence of institutions of higher learning that causes young people to relocate for the sake of their educations. Rural areas also face tighter labour markets with fewer opportunities for employment, with most of those available concentrated in a small number of local industries. Above all, however, many rural areas suffer from lack of access to quality public services and infrastructure, including *“childcare, education, long-term care, housing, labour market and social services”* which can *“also be an important source of job creation”*.

In a report on [“The Family: The Missing Ingredient in the Revitalisation of the EU’s Rural Areas”](#) jointly published in July 2021 with the Spanish *Foundation Madrina*, FAFCE provided four proposals for rural revitalisation in Europe:

- integration and connectedness, encompassing everything from digital connection to adequate access to public transportation networks;
- economic prosperity, with an emphasis on investment to create jobs in accordance with the green transition;
- attractiveness: financing of projects, social services and public utilities, and markets for goods and labour;

- overall sustainability, in both an environmental, economic, and social sense, with comprehensive family policies as the root support to sustainable development.

**FAFCE encourages the European Union to help address the problem of low fertility rates, brain drain, depopulation, and ageing, notably by designing and implementing family policies to increase the attractiveness of rural regions. Worth is to mention that the depopulation in rural areas is only a symptom of the demographic winter touching all Europe. Additionally, rural families tend to face additional challenges: parents struggle to have a work-life balance and access to childcare care services, the elderly are often isolated from both long-term care systems and social life, and the youth lacks access to education, job opportunities and to adequate support for their transition to family life.**

## **Depopulation in rural areas is only a symptom of the demographic winter touching all Europe**

The 2020 Report of the European Commission on the [Impact of Demographic Change](#) acknowledges a reality: Europe is ageing. Yet, the challenges do not come from the European population getting older, but from the fact that Europeans have less and less children, which threatens the viability of our economic and welfare systems.

**While the depopulation is a visible phenomenon in rural areas, it is crucial to recognise that demographic change is an issue that needs to be tackled and reversed at the entire European level, both in rural and urban areas.**

On 20 May 2021, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on "[Reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments](#)". Among its considerations, the report enumerated the importance of family policies, stating that "*the importance of work-life balance is not properly recognised; whereas parents, children and families must be guaranteed support, including accessible childcare infrastructure, flexible work arrangements, help for single-parent families and parents with children with disabilities, and adequate financial support during maternity, paternity and parental leave; whereas such support can help to reverse negative demographic trends*". The adopted text furthermore "*highlights also the importance of family friendly legislation that facilitates a satisfactory work-life balance*" and "*believes, moreover, that investments under the ESF+ [European Social Fund Plus] should promote the employability of women and single parents struggling to find employment, should ensure funding for affordable childcare facilities and support young families*". The report also recalls "*the needs of children in the care of a family member or living alone while parents are working abroad*". Thus, the Resolution stands out for its attentiveness to many of the factors that cause couples to delay childbirth or abandon it altogether, from both an economic and social perspective.

In another report on "[Guidelines for the 2022 Budget - Section III](#)", the European Parliament stressed that *"sustainable and long-term solutions must be found to successfully fight structural demographic challenges, as well as to mitigate brain drain in rural, insular, remote and less developed areas and regions of the EU; emphasises the need for financial resources to revitalise regions suffering from population decline through investments in social and demographic policies that support families and to provide ageing populations in Europe with adequate support in terms of access to healthcare, mobility and public services"*.

As stated in the 2021 Fall FAFCE Resolution "[Families for Sustainable and Integral Development](#)", the Federation

- 3) *Expresses its concerns about the fertility rate in Europe of 1,53 children per women in 2019; recalling the disastrous impact of the demographic unbalance on social and pension systems, labour market dynamism, economic sustainability and social cohesion, as stressed by the recent joint Reflection Document on "Family: The Missing Ingredient In Rural Revitalisation";*
- 4) *Stresses that couples face many economic, social and cultural obstacles in their wish to start a family and to have children; regrets that couples in Europe have overall one child less that they would want to;*
- 5) *Invites all to recognise and consider the grandparents as an integral part of the family;*
- 6) *Notes that the promotion of a culture of life, where children are welcomed, does not seek to impose on parents to have more children, but rather it seeks to allow the freedom and the conditions for parents to have the number of children they want;*
- 7) *Calls for effective demographic and family policies to generate a demographic Spring, taking the example of the national good practices, as highlighted by the FAFCE Dialogues on demographic challenges; stresses the need for tax justice, as a fair award for the contribution of families to our communities;"*

**Family policies should enable all families all over Europe to have the freedom of having the number of children they want to have, and not for them to be constrained by economic, social and cultural obstacles.**

## Rural families face additional challenges

**All families face obstacles to welcome a new child, and later when caring for them. The situation in rural area presents to many extents additional challenges for families.**

### *The parents: the struggle to have a work-life balance and access to childcare care services*

Parents in rural areas struggle additionally to ensure a sustainable work-life balance when considering additional costs connected to the distance between the workplace and residence, or to access schools, health and social services from remote areas. The 2019 [EU directive on work-life balance for parents and carers](#) should to be implement with a special care given to rural areas. Flexible working arrangement are relevant to resolve some challenges related to long commuting distances. As telework technology becomes cheaper and more accessible, new working settings can also be developed.

In the framework of the preparation of the **European Care Strategy**, FAFCE also wishes to stress the need, especially in rural areas, for a structural shift in the way care is perceived, starting with the recognition of the care role of families, as the first partner of public institutions when it comes to care. This recognition also supposes for the EU and its Member-States to invest in informal forms of care provided by the family. Informal care, especially family care, is at the basis of our care system in Europe. Everyone receives or provides care at some point in their lives, especially in the context of family bonds. Informal care constitutes a win-win for our communities: it is a free, high-quality and tailored service produced by the family. Informal care is yet still today largely overlooked. As a remedy, parents should be recognised as carers, entitled to a recognition of their contribution to the common good, via family benefits and a fair taxation.

On the other side, families should be ensured available, affordable and quality child care services in rural areas. This element should be considered in the **revision of the Barcelona targets** when it comes to formal childcare. FAFCE however stresses the value of informal care as an equal alternative to formal childcare. Access does not entail necessary achievement of those targets: parents and families should remain free to decide how they organise their work-life balance and the solution they choose to care for their children.

### *The elderly: access to long-term care and social inclusion*

The European Commission published in January 2021 a [Green Paper on Ageing](#), stressing the importance to tackle this reality in Europe. In a report published jointly with the COMECE entitled "[The Elderly and the Future of Europe: Intergenerational solidarity and care in times of demographic change](#)", FAFCE introduced several solutions and national good practices

when it comes to develop flexible and diversified long-term care systems in Europe, including family-based and community-based care, in addition to affordable and quality institutional long-term care. Worth is to mention that most of the elderly people wish to stay in their family settings as long as possible, and this wish should be supported to its maximum extend.

Tailored solutions concerning the silver economy should always take into account the elderly in their own environment, respecting their need to form part of a community, both in cities and in rural areas: in both situations, loneliness is biggest threat to their wellbeing and facilitating community-oriented solutions is key. This could be done by promoting significant links even between people who are not close, such as day care centers open to the area, residential family homes, different forms of social caretakers, neighbourhood solidarity projects. The provision of professional services is not sufficient to answer to the human need for contact and relationship. What is needed is the sustaining of contexts within which people can relate to one another, thus having people whom they can care about and who can care about them.

**The European Union should also, in parallel to the development of a silver economy, work to ensure the proper inclusion of elderly in networks of solidarity, be it their families, family associations, or other groups of sociability.**

### *The youth: access to education, job opportunities and support their transition to family life*

Brain drain arises when young persons to seek better opportunities in terms of education and work. Investment in education and job opportunities are thus crucial in rural areas. The [reinforced Youth Guarantee](#) sets up a comprehensive job support available to young people at risk of unemployment and unable to enter today's labour market. In March 2021, the European Parliament adopted its "[Guidelines for the 2022 Budget – Section III](#)", with a similar focus on the youth. The Resolution calls for "*all funding possibilities [to be] fully explored in order to successfully improve labour market inclusion, in particular via vocational training, measures to improve social inclusion, working conditions and social protection, including for persons with disabilities, as well as family and life prospects for young people, taking into account the work-life balance directive*".

Access to employment and career prospects are key for young people to become financially independent and fulfill their work goals. However, work is not only a goal, but also a mean to fulfill more important life projects, such as to start a family. When addressing the needs and the hopes of young people, the European Commission should also answer to their attachment to family, and their wish to start one.

## Policy recommendations

**A comprehensive answer to demographic challenges in rural areas must attack the root issues of rural depopulation: lower fertility rates and brain drain. Family policies allow to kill two birds with a stone: they support a fertility rate aligned to the wish of families free from economic constrains, and they encourage the long-term settlement of families in those areas for several generations, thus creating a network of solidarity for the elderly.**

Our Federation calls the European Union to support the investment in family policies at the national level, including in the implementation and the monitoring of the national recovery plans. Indeed, the EU Recovery Plan includes a specific category of investments in education, skills and job that will benefit families (education, training, social housing, schools, universities, hospitals, social innovation, healthcare, long-term care and accessibility, etc.). Yet it is to be regretted that families were not directly mentioned in these EU instruments, although they play a crucial role for their communities with the solidarity they create among generations. But families can indirectly receive support from the NextGenerationEU. It is crucial to invest for governments not only to invest in social policies, but also family policies, considering it as a form of development policy.

As stated in its 2020 Fall Board Resolution on "[Family is the heart of the post-pandemic recovery](#)", FAFCE called "*the EU and all EU Member States, in the respect of the subsidiarity principle, to put demographic and family policies at the centre of the European Union Recovery Plan, which will*

- 1) *provide support to families with children as a top priority in the implementation of the Next Generation EU: emergency policies are crucial to prevent the impoverishment of families and constituting the fair recognition of their commitment during the pandemic;*
- 2) *adopt a new paradigm to put the family and family associations at the centre of long-term policies in Europe: family policies should not be considered as a cost but rather as an investment in the formation of human capital for the future of Europe."*