

Chapter 5

Youth transitions: chances and choices – Global demographic and social challenges

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INTRODUCTION

When addressing the question “How healthy is the present and the future in Europe”, I take the approach which deals with both the macro-scale socio-demographic change, following the logic of the world-system analysis (for example, Wallerstein 1974), and the individual-level analysis of life-course events looking at trends and capacities of individuals and ways people take decisions related to transitions. Combining the two levels of analysis is particularly relevant in the context of the current economic crisis and austerity policy, runaway globalisation, and global demographic and ecological challenges.

Youth transitions are essentially to do with crucial changes in the human life course – the transition from one level of education to another, the transition from education to work, the transition from parental care (and home) to independent life or own family life – all the phases increasingly associated with mobility across borders.

Youth transitions occur not only against the background of individual biosocial growth and developmental processes, but are also strongly conditioned by societal processes determined by demographic, cultural, and socio-economic dynamics. Hence, before looking at individual-level life-course events, I want to mention some societal developments, mainly in the domain of demographics, that help to understand some of the challenges and opportunities with which young people are likely to be confronted.

DEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS

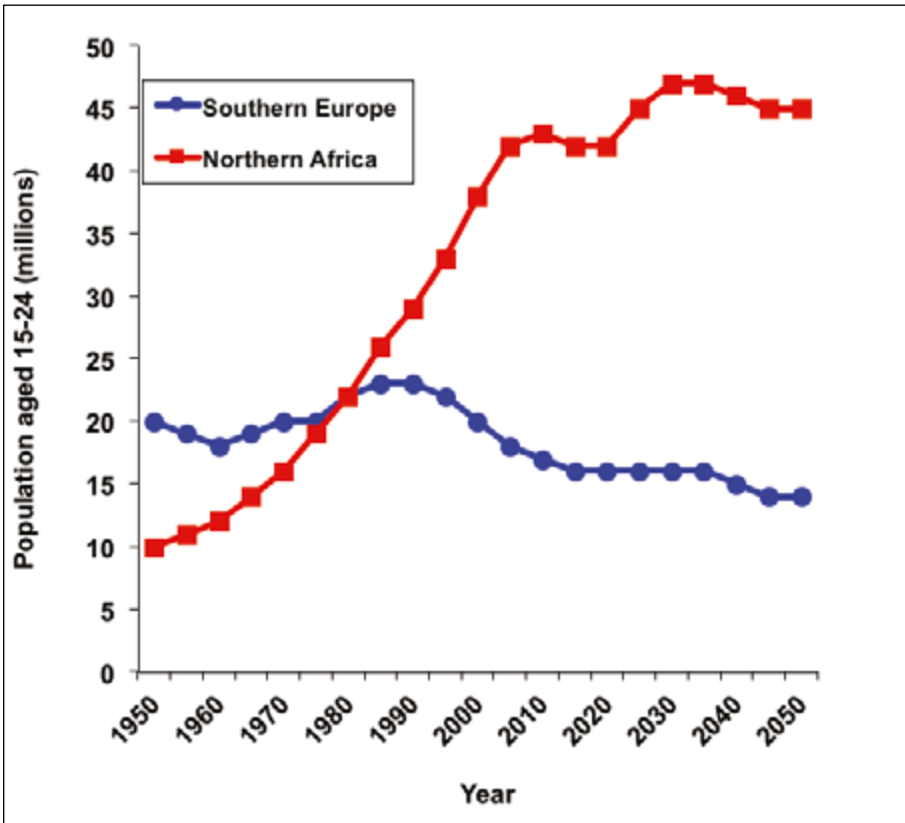
Young people as an age group

Age is a biosocial phenomenon dependent on the biological process and the living conditions and norms by which borders between different age groups are defined (for example, Cliquet 2010), although for some authors age is mainly a historically and culturally constructed, institutionalised and controlled phenomenon (for instance, Wyn and White 1997; Côté and Allahar 2006).

The common meaning of youth is the period between childhood and adult age, but there are different interpretations of the age range. For instance, in its report *Youth in Europe* Eurostat defines young people as those aged between 15 and 29. In Europe, this age group accounts for some 20% of the total population.

In the coming decades the population in Europe aged between 15 and 29 will gradually decrease, whereas in surrounding regions it will strongly increase (see for instance, the differential development of the population aged 15-24 in southern Europe and North Africa in Figure 1).

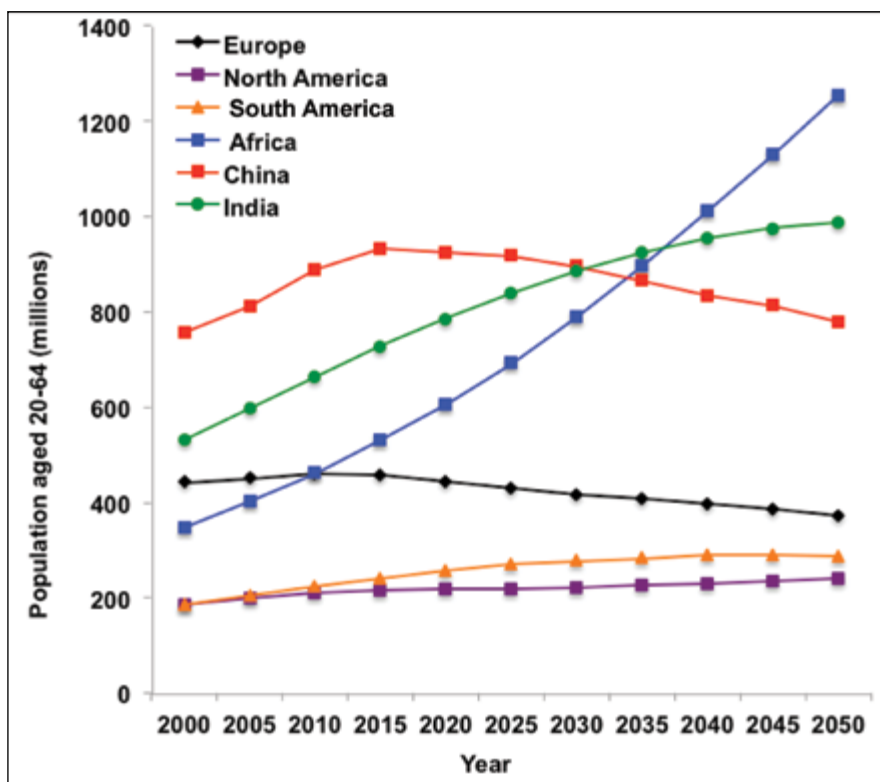
Figure 1: Population of age 15-24 in North Africa and southern Europe (United Nations 2012, medium variant scenario)



Decreasing labour supply

As a consequence of past demographic trends – the dying out of the post-Second World War baby boom, the persistent below-replacement fertility rate – Europe will experience a gradual decrease in its population of working age in the coming decades (see, for instance, the population prospects for those aged 20 to 64 in Figure 2), except in cases where there is an (unlikely) increase in fertility rates or high immigration. The European prospects are in sharp contrast with developments in Africa or India, for example.

Figure 2: Population prospects for those aged 20-64 in selected regions of the world (United Nations, 2012)



In some scientific and policy quarters, the shrinking population of working age causes concern about a possible shortage of labour supply, but in others this is seen as an opportunity to contribute to the dilution of unemployment and in particular youth unemployment, because the present reserve labour supply which is available in the unemployed population will be absorbed. However, the future might be more complex than this expectation may suppose. The development of the relationship between labour supply and unemployment is not necessarily straightforward. The increasing concentration of unemployment among less qualified and less skilled people forms an indication that, in a technologically progressive culture, a shortage of labour supply might coexist with an assorted unemployed population (Blanchet and Marchand 1991).

The expected decrease in the population of working age might induce several societal advantages, such as the adaptation of labour organisation in a more flexible way, in increase in work opportunities for women, the activation of older people, etc. Overall, a shrinking population on the densely populated and highly consuming European continent might contribute to alleviating pressures that are already too high on the world's natural resources and ecosystems (Meadows et al. 2004; Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2008; Cliquet and Avramov, forthcoming). But these opportunities come with a price tag.

Increasing old-age dependency ratios

Modernisation goes hand in hand with a considerable ageing population, both in absolute and relative terms. The two causes of this phenomenon are well known: increased longevity and low fertility rates.

The oft-heard complaints, particularly in policy quarters, about the disastrous societal consequences of population ageing are somewhat odd, because modern societies are doing everything to prolong longevity, and are obviously in good health (Avramov and Cliquet 2005).

Nevertheless, an ageing population leads to high costs for covering pensions and the health and welfare care of senior citizens. More dependent seniors mean a higher financial and care burden on the active population. Already in the mid-1970s, the Economic Commission for Europe estimated that the public cost of maintaining one elderly dependent was three times that of a dependent child. Figure 3 shows that the old-age dependency ratio has been increasing in the last few decades and will continue to increase in the near future. It is a trend to which modern societies will have to adapt by means of a multitude of policy measures. It is a phenomenon that is of the utmost importance for young people to understand, in order to prepare for adaptive changes in attitudes in their adult life and the behaviour towards seniors, as well as their own life in old age.

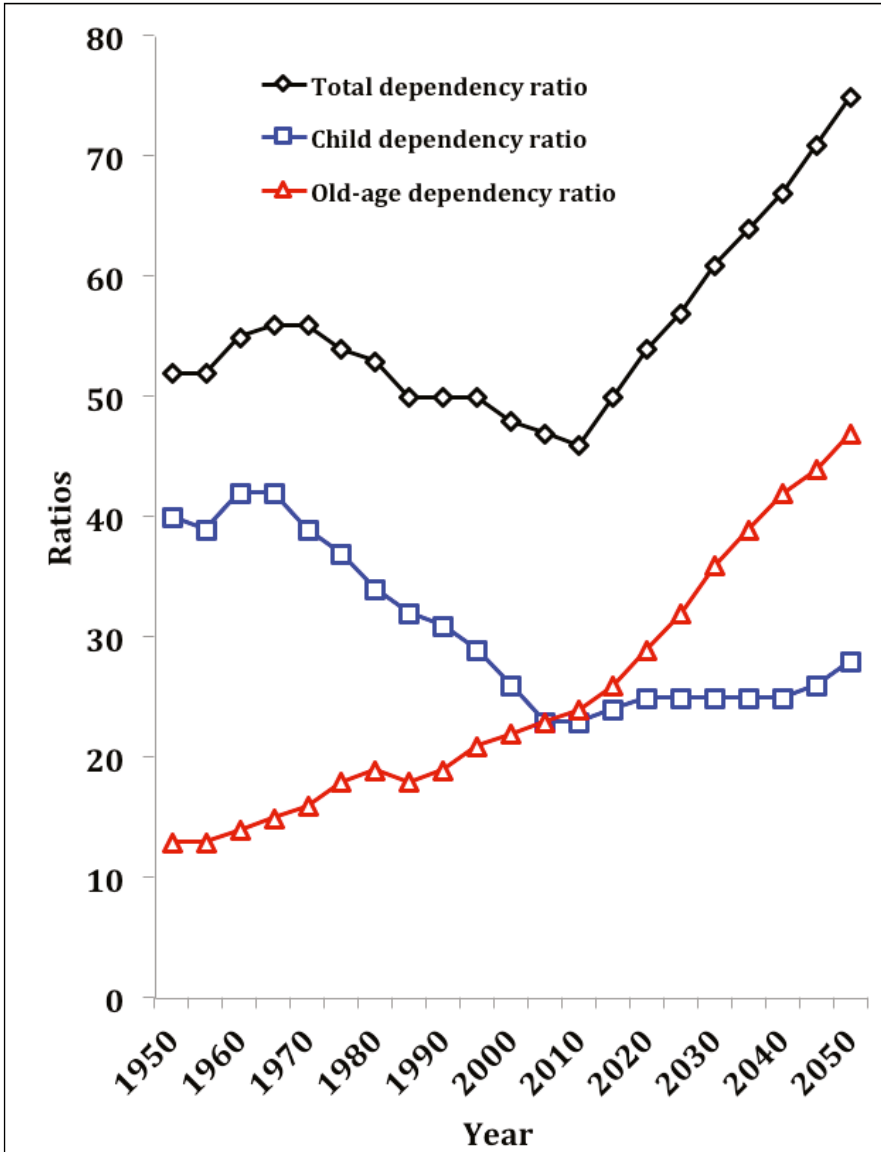
As concerns demographic processes, inequalities in life chances between generations (see Figure 3) and between populations in different countries (see Figure 4) will persist, since they are partly embedded in demography.

Immigration: the miracle solution?

The future of Europe's youth population and its transition to adulthood will also be influenced by the immigration policies European countries adopt: large numbers of immigrants who usually belong to younger adult age groups may increase competition for jobs; massive immigration from culturally/religiously different areas where universally recognised rights – including those of freedom of expression and ideology, sexual/gender equality, individual emancipatory opportunities (rights) – and democratic decision making are largely absent or do not exist at all may intensify in-group/out-group conflicts or may threaten fundamental values generally accepted in European countries (Avramov and Cliquet 2005).

It is beyond doubt that in the coming decades Europe will increasingly be confronted with high immigration pressures from African and Asian regions dealing with considerable demographic/economic imbalances and from areas of conflict.

Figure 3: Dependency ratios for Europe (United Nations 2012)

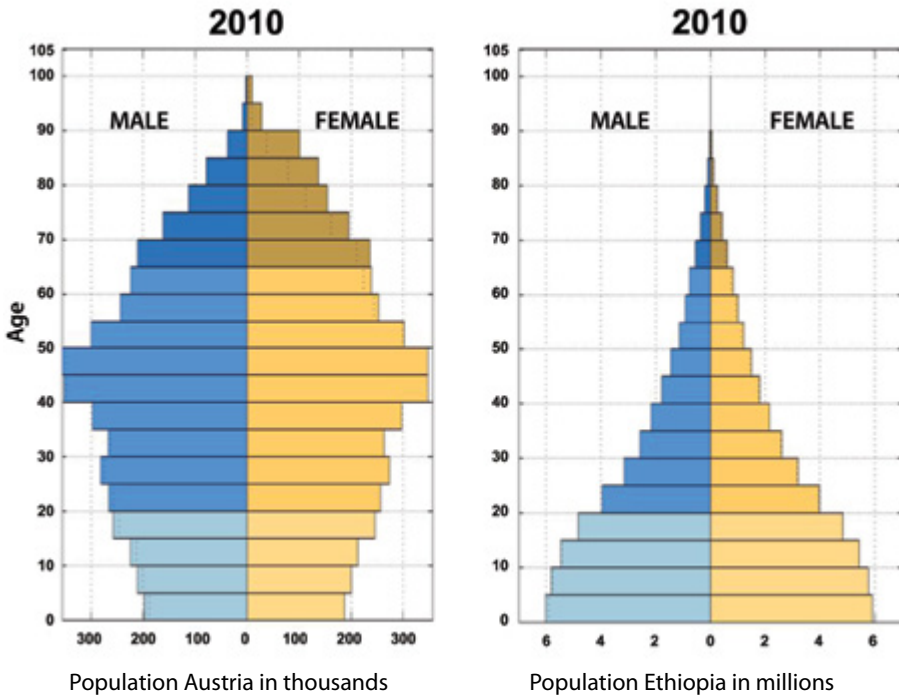


Legend:

Child dependency ratio is the ratio of the population 0-14 to the population 15-64

Old-age dependency ratio is the ratio of the population 65+ to the population 15-64

Figure 4: Population pyramids Austria and Ethiopia, 2010 (United Nations)



Some European policy makers believe that immigration is the miracle solution to the existing or expected population ageing and population decline. Whereas it is true that mass immigration can quickly compensate losses in population numbers (although not without provoking many other societal problems), demographers have for a long time shown that mass immigration appears, in a long-term perspective, to have no substantial effect on the population age structure (e.g. Blanchet 1988; Espenshade 1987; Lesthaeghe et al. 1988; Steinmann 1991; Prinz and Lutz 1993). The “replacement migration” (see United Nations 2000) is no adequate long-term solution for demographically ageing societies (e.g. Coleman 1992; Feld 2000; Avramov and Cliquet 2005).

Younger generations will have to consider immigration policies more carefully than previous generations did, not only taking into account the available scientific knowledge about the longer-term demographic and social effects of migratory movements, but at the same time acknowledging the fact that the inevitable further globalisation of human activities in diverse fields such as commerce, scientific research, tourism, and policy making requires increasing levels of mobility between countries and continents. In a comprehensive and multidimensional policy approach selective migration must have a place, but in this perspective a migration policy is very different from an approach in which population ageing or decline would only be compensated for by massive immigration. An efficient immigration policy requires a well-prepared and multifaceted integration and fitting-in policy in order to avoid enclosing the new immigrants in minority ghettos of lower socio-economic strata with few opportunities for upward social mobility and higher risks of social exclusion.

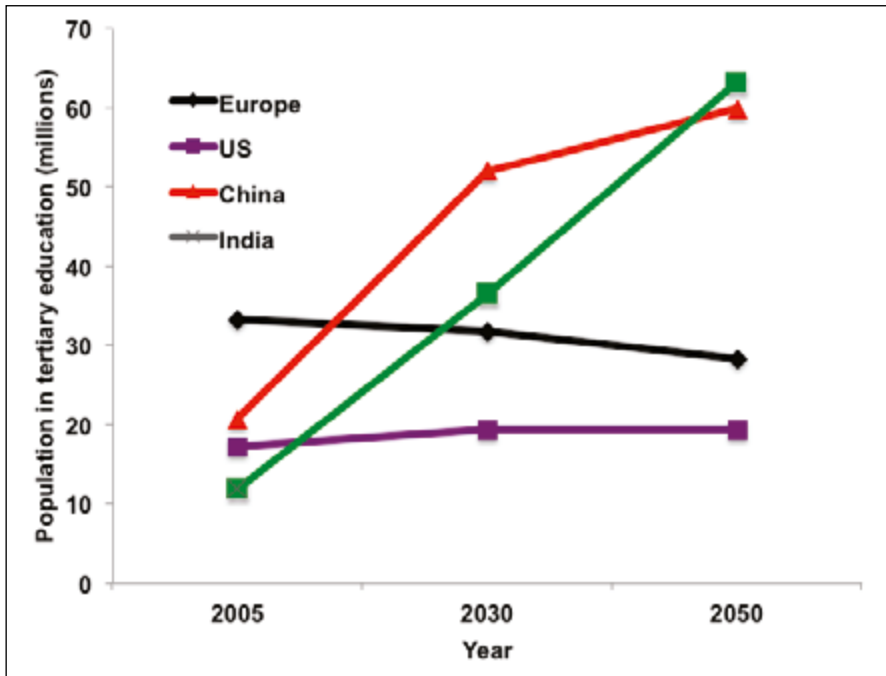
LIFE-COURSE CHANGES

A characteristic feature of modernity, in particular since the Second World War, is the prolongation of the youth phase in the life course.

Contrary to what one might think at first sight, it is not only the important increase in the extension of the educational phase that is responsible for this prolongation. Major changes in labour market conditions, such as the increasing difficulty to enter the labour market, casual work, precarious employment, and part-time work, contribute to this prolongation process (Blossfeld et al. 2005). Finally, the availability of modern birth control methods, changes in norms regarding sexual behaviour and factors such as the increased wealth of parents and the leisure and travel opportunities for young people, in tandem with the educational and labour market changes, allow young people to postpone major life decisions such as leaving the parental home, couple formation in a household independent from the parental home, and parenthood.

Education and life chances

Figure 5: Population in tertiary education – absolute figures in millions – extrapolations to 2030 and 2050 on the basis of 2000-05 trends



Legend: Hypotheses about the proportion of students in tertiary education in the population range aged 20-24 for calculating absolute numbers in tertiary education in 2030 and 2050: 2030: Europe (including Russian Federation) and US: 80%; China: 60%; India: 30%
2050: Europe (including Russian Federation) and US: 80%; China: 80%; India: 60%

In an increasingly complex modern culture and society, with their scientifically, technologically and bureaucratically driven dynamics, prolonged and high quality education becomes a key instrument for further scientific, technological and societal progress.

From this perspective it is useful to have a look at educational trends worldwide. In Figure 5, using population data from the United Nations World Population Prospects (2012) and educational data from the UNESCO database, the numbers of students in tertiary education in major parts of the world have been extrapolated on the basis of recent developments.

Although the relative share of students in tertiary education is different between the West and major Asian countries, the latter will soon surpass the western world in absolute numbers of people with higher education because of their huge population base. Hence, in the near future, the younger generations in the West may expect stronger competition on a global scale, not only because of the modernisation of major developing countries, but also because of the work ethic prevailing in some of those countries.

Some fall through the cracks

Education, which is a key instrument for preventing and overcoming social exclusion, in practice often compounds and reinforces social inequalities. Children from families with interlinking social disadvantages such as poverty, unemployment, bad housing, low initial education of parents, poor literacy, immigrant or ethnic minority background, are over-represented among school dropouts in all European countries.

Early school leaving persists as a serious social problem. Although there has been a slight improvement in the early 2000s, Avramov warned the EU Council of Ministers that goals set to substantially reduce the percentage of early school leavers by 2010 were not likely to be reached. Additional efforts were needed to reach the benchmark levels set for 2010 (Avramov 2008). Indeed the target of 10% was not reached and the European Commission has simply delayed reaching this target for another decade, until 2020.

Transition from education to work

In Europe, this transition mainly takes place between the ages of 18 and 24. In 2006, 59% of young people aged 18 were exclusively in education or training, and only 13% were exclusively occupationally active. Conversely, by the age of 24 these proportions were reversed. However, 20% of all Europeans aged 18 and 16% of those aged 24 combined education or training with economic activity (Eurostat 2007).

Youth unemployment (for those under 25) is unacceptably high at almost 22% (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1036>). By 2020, it is estimated that 35% of all jobs will require high level qualifications, combined with a capacity to adapt and innovate, compared to 29% today. This means 15 million more jobs requiring high level qualifications. But the EU economy is currently hampered by a shortage of highly

qualified Information and Communication Technology (ICT) practitioners, and fewer than one person in three in the EU has a higher education degree compared to over 40% in the US and over 50% in Japan. Too many young people today leave school early, increasing their risk of becoming unemployed or inactive, living in poverty and causing high economic and social costs. Currently, 14% of 18 to 24-year-olds in the EU have less than upper secondary education and are not in further education or training. Europe also has to do better on literacy, as 24% of 15-year-olds are low performers in reading literacy and this share has increased in recent years. What is worse, however, is that unemployment is also currently high among young graduates from different levels of education and training. European systems have been slow to respond to the requirements of the knowledge society, failing to adapt curricula and programmes to the changing needs of the labour market.

Young workers are very often hired on temporary contracts, which may allow firms to test the skills and productivity of workers before offering them an open-ended job. However, too often, temporary contracts are just a cheaper alternative to permanent ones. This is particularly the case in countries where the dismissal regulations are very different for temporary and open-ended contracts. The result is a segmented labour market, where many young workers experience a sequence of temporary jobs alternating with unemployment, with little chance of moving to a more stable, open-ended contract and thus have incomplete contributions to pension provisions. Young women are particularly at risk of falling into this segmentation trap. Finally, the indicators for youth labour market performance do not fully capture that an astonishing 15% of 20 to 24-year-olds in Europe are disengaged from both work and education (NEETs: not in education, employment or training) and risk being permanently excluded from the labour market and dependent on benefits. The most recent presentation of statistics on NEETs (e.g. Eurydice and Eurostat 2014) merges the age groups by presenting data on 15 to 29-year-olds that mask the high levels of the 20 to 24 age group.

Transitions to couple formation and parenthood

The 20th century, in particular the period since the Second World War, was also characterised by many changes in the timing of key biosocial events in the life course of young people.

The average age of people experiencing their first sexual encounter decreased in the course of the last century, from over 20 years to below 18 (Cliquet 2003). In recent years this age has decreased even further and the average now lies at around 16 years in the Nordic countries (Durex Network Research Unit 2009). Premarital sex has in most countries become a general behavioural pattern, although differences in age at the time of the first experience of intercourse continue to exist – it is earlier in northern Europe than in central Europe and, especially, southern Europe.

In contrast, the age of people marrying for the first time has increased and in many north-western European countries it is around or even above 30 years of age (UNECE Statistical Division Database 2014). However, in many cases marriage is being preceded by unmarried cohabitation or couple formation whereby both partners live in separate households – known as LAT (“Living Apart Together”) relations (see, for example, Kiernan 2002; OECD Family Database 2012).

Another change in household formation concerns the fact that more young people leave the parental home to live on their own before cohabiting or marrying. This results in an increasing number of single-person households of young adults.

Finally, since the mid-1970s, the mean age of people giving birth for the first time has increased continuously, from the early 20s to the late 20s. The average now lies between 25 and 30 years (UNECE Statistical Division Database 2014). Choosing to have children later partly explains the decreasing or low fertility rate levels, because there is insufficient recuperation at higher ages, either because of increasing subfecundity or because choosing to have children later easily leads to renunciation of family building once a particular lifestyle without children or with a small number of children has been adopted (Lesthaeghe 2001).

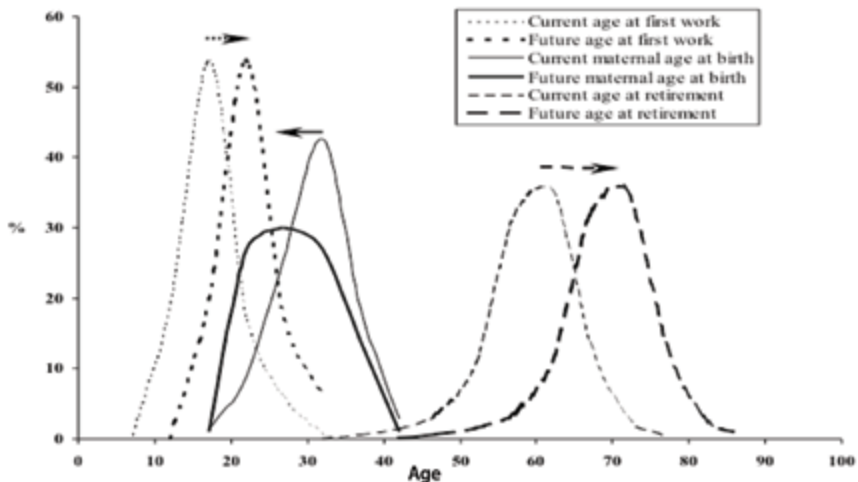
RETHINKING THE 21ST-CENTURY LIFE-COURSE PARADIGM

An individual's living circumstances largely depend on his or her history, which is a mix of chances and choices regarding health, education, work, family life, personality features and socio-cultural environment in which opportunities have been enhanced or limited.

More effective ways are needed of spreading the risks associated with competition in the labour market; the low-income/high-needs nexus, stress at work and high demands on time in the workplace and by the family over the entire life course.

Past public policies have rather badly managed the economy of time of individuals and families in the life-course perspective. The highest burden of duty is on young people during early years of adulthood in which they have to combine ongoing education, establishing themselves in the labour force, setting up an independent household and forming a family. In contrast, there is much free time after statutory retirement – time that is being spent unproductively by the overwhelming majority of elderly people.

Figure 6: Rethinking the life course (Avramov and Cliquet 2003)



Hence, the life-course distribution of time for the main activities relating to studies, paid work, domestic activity, partnership, parenthood, care provision, and active and passive leisure needs be reshuffled by means of active welfare policies enabling individuals to spread more innovatively paid and unpaid work and leisure time over the entire life course (Figure 6). This reshuffling requires rethinking the organising principles of the entire economy and in particular the normative basis of labour market policies – a difficult task because obstacles to such innovation reside not only in the current market mechanisms and forces, but also in the attitudes of older adults who oppose proposals for increasingly active life at a later age (Avramov and Cliquet 2003; 2006; 2008).

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