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Meeting on the Study on Trends in the Demographic
Structure in the European Region: Health and
Social Implications

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TRENDS IN THE DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE IN THE EUROPEAN REGION: FAMILY FORMATION

Summary of paper presented
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Changes in age and family structure

In 1980 most of the European countries had a population relatively older than in 1960, the trend being more marked in the female population, due to better life expectancy in women. During the next twenty years, the majority of countries in the Region will experience a continuing, although less rapid, increase in the proportion of elderly.

The decrease in birth rate leads to a reduction in the size of families and an increased number of couples without children. The increasing number of widowed and divorced persons aged 65 and over results in a higher proportion of single-person households.

Changes in age at marriage and divorce

In most European countries, the age at first marriage decreased between 1960 and 1980 in a comparable manner for men and women. Age-specific marriage rates are also decreasing in the majority of countries. This results in a decreasing number of marriages combined with a reduction in the age at first marriage.

The situation is more heterogeneous for divorce, with, however, more countries showing a trend towards decreasing age at divorce. Age-specific divorce rates also differ widely with a generally increasing trend, particularly in western Europe. This increase in divorce rates, combined with a decrease in age at divorce, results in more possibilities for the constitution of a new family after divorce.

Structure of households

There is a general trend towards reduction of the family size with an increasing proportion of single-person households. The German Democratic Republic is a remarkable exception to this rule, with a decrease in the number of small households (one or two persons) and an increased number of large families (five persons or more).

Characteristics of past evolution and possible future trends

All countries should expect changes in their age structure due to the low birth rates they have experienced, whether or not these rates have already started to increase again. This may result in changes in the dependency ratio. In all cases, there will be qualitative changes in the dependant population, with an increased proportion of elderly. The consequences on the number and structure of households will be a reduction in the family size, and an increase in the number of couples without children. The demand for health services will shift from maternal and child health to care of the elderly. If other conditions remain the same, this means a need for increased capacity of health and social services, taking into account specific needs of the aged and the fact that less support will be provided by the family. One should also study the consequences on children by an increase in the proportion of families with an only child, as well as the consequences of increased divorce rates on the life cycle.