



Age-It and the promise of **Positive** Demography

Rethinking ageing with sustainable policies

Daniele Vignoli and Gustavo De Santis (Eds.)

ISBN: 978-88-32003-17-8

Editorial and graphic design project Caterina Livi Bacci

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Neodemos Associations 2025

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1. INTRODUCTION. BEYOND THE “DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER”

Daniele Vignoli and Gustavo De Santis

Population change is one of the defining stories of our time. Longer lives and smaller families are reshaping our societies in ways that no previous generation has experienced. These trends are often portrayed as a crisis—a “demographic winter” or an impending burden on future generations. Yet there is another way to see them. Population ageing is also a testament to human progress: we live longer, healthier, and safer lives than ever before. Demographic change is not merely a challenge to be managed, but also a success to be valued and an opportunity to be shaped.

This e-book is grounded in a positive demographic perspective—a viewpoint centred on change and adaptation, echoing key recommendations from the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and the European Commission. As emphasised by the Italian Association for Population Studies (AISP), positive demography does not mean overlooking the real challenges posed by population ageing, low fertility, or social inequality. Rather, it invites us to shift our gaze from fear and alarm towards understanding and action. It encourages us to view demographic transformation as a new phase in the history of our societies: not better or worse than before, but different, and rich in possibilities for renewal.

Italy stands at the forefront of this transition. It is among the oldest countries in the world, with one in four citizens aged 65 or over and one of the highest life expectancies globally. Fertility remains very low, and regional differences continue to shape demographic realities across the country. Yet Italy also provides an exceptional setting in which to explore the future of ageing societies. Its achievements in longevity, vibrant local welfare systems, and long tradition of family solidarity make it a “natural laboratory” for studying how to age well in an ageing society. The Italian case therefore offers lessons not only for Europe, but also for many countries now undergoing similar demographic shifts.

It is within this context that the *Age-It Research Programme – Ageing Well in an Ageing Society* was established. Supported by the National

Recovery and Resilience Plan and the Italian Ministry of University and Research, Age-It represents one of the largest and most ambitious research initiatives on ageing ever launched in Europe. With an investment exceeding €115 million and a broad interdisciplinary partnership, Age-It brings together experts in demography, medicine, biology, economics, psychology, engineering, and the social sciences. Its aim is not only to understand the causes and consequences of population ageing, but also to design practical, evidence-based solutions for individuals, families, and institutions.

Age-It is organised into ten thematic research centres, known as “Spokes”, each devoted to a key challenge of ageing: from the demographic foundations of longevity, fertility, and migration, to the biology of ageing, the complexity of multimorbidity, and the sustainability of care systems. Other Spokes address the silver economy and the role of older adults in the workforce, the cultural and political dimensions of ageing societies, and the development of innovative technologies for health and inclusion. Cross-cutting initiatives also focus on education and lifelong learning, data management, and the transfer of research findings into public policy.

The central message of Age-It is clear: ageing should not be seen solely as a cost, but as a shared opportunity to promote well-being, equity, and sustainability. By building bridges between scientific research and policymaking, the programme seeks to foster a holistic vision of ageing one that combines social innovation with practical action. The challenge is not merely to adapt to demographic change, but to shape it, aligning demographic trends with the broader goals of sustainable development and intergenerational justice.

This e-book draws on Age-It’s research agenda and presents a selection of the most pressing population challenges facing Italy and other ageing societies today. It explores the demography of ageing, including fertility (Ch. 2 and 3), longevity and health (Ch. 4), and migration dynamics (Ch. 5 and 6); the growing focus on frailty and resilience in later life, examining how to assess and mitigate vulnerability (Ch. 7); the demography of care, analysing how families, institutions, and communities can respond to this growing issue (Ch. 8); the silver economy, where older adults play active roles as workers, consumers, and innovators (Ch. 9); and the question of intergenerational justice, concerning fairness between younger and older generations (Ch. 10).

Each of these topics is discussed with particular attention to their

policy implications. The goal is to translate demographic knowledge into actionable insights for a sustainable ageing agenda. This involves rethinking traditional indicators—such as the old-age dependency ratio—which too often convey an overly pessimistic picture, and instead developing measures that better capture improvements in health, education, and life expectancy. It also entails identifying strategies that combine adaptation—preparing for the realities of an ageing population—with mitigation—addressing the underlying drivers of demographic imbalance, such as persistently low fertility or unequal access to care.

The positive demography perspective promoted by Age-It thus offers a new way forward. It recognises that demographic change is not destiny, but a domain for policy action. Just as societies have successfully adapted to industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, they can also adapt to population ageing. The key lies in foresight, inclusiveness, and a steadfast commitment to fairness across generations.

Ultimately, the story of ageing is the story of humanity’s success—and its next great challenge. With the right policies and a shared vision, it can also become the story of our renewal. This e-book invites readers to engage with that challenge, exploring how a positive and sustainable approach to demographic change can help build societies that truly enable everyone to age well—today and tomorrow.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge funding from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Next Generation EU, Project Age-It: “Ageing Well in an Ageing Society”. The views and opinions expressed are only those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

<https://ageit.eu/wp/en/>

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