

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES OF THE POLISH SOCIETY – A CHALLENGE FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: The demographic changes progressing in recent decades carry numerous challenges for the socio-economic life of Poland. The aim of the article is to describe processes such as depopulation of the Polish society and its aging in the context of the challenges these processes constitute for sustainable development. The article focuses on the issue of population aging in the context of selected sustainable development indicators: public health and demographic changes.

Keywords: geing of the population, demographic changes, sustainable development.

ZMIANY DEMOGRAFICZNE SPOŁECZEŃSTWA POLSKIEGO WYZWANIEM DLA ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROZWOJU

Streszczenie: Postępujące w ostatnich dekadach zmiany demograficzne niosą ze sobą szereg wyzwań dla społeczno-gospodarczego życia Polski. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie takich procesów jak m.in. depopulacja społeczeństwa polskiego i jego starzenia się w kontekście wyzwań jakie niosą te procesy dla zrównoważonego rozwoju. W artykule skoncentrowano się na problematyce starzenia się ludności w kontekście wybranych wskaźników zrównoważonego rozwoju: zdrowia publicznego i zmian demograficznych.

Słowa kluczowe: starzenie się społeczeństwa, zmiany demograficzne, rozwój zrównoważony.

1. Introduction

The society's demographic situation may foster development, or quite the opposite, constitute a barrier for it. The unfavourable situation causes negative consequences on the job market, additionally it adversely affects the health care system, social welfare or the pension system. Declining population combined with changes in its age structure results in the

development impairment opportunities in both social and economic aspects. The demographic ageing of the population of Poland and Europe is a global process. It is forecasted that in the perspective of the coming decades this process will intensify leading to significant changes in the proportions between older and young people (CSO, 2017; World Population Prospects, 2015). The steady decrease of population in reproductive age correlates to the increasing number of elderly people requiring care and support. The growing needs, resulting from those changes, will be accompanied by declining demographic resources aimed at satisfying those needs. As emphasized by demographers, Poland is one of the countries where the demographic change will be particularly extreme because of the prognosis that by 2060 the population of Poland will turn from the youngest in the European Union to the oldest (Okólski, 2010). What is the significance of these demographic changes for sustainable development?

2. The demographic situation of Poland

The growing interest in the issues of old age and aging, that could be observed in recent years, is undoubtedly related to the rapidly progressing processes of demographic changes in Poland (Szukalski, Kałuża-Kopias, 2013; Czapiński, Błędowski, 2014). The ageing of the population in Poland is a rapidly occurring phenomenon, leading to a situation where demographic changes happen much faster than the economic growth (Łobodzińska, 2016). Due to recognition of demographic changes and predicting their consequences economically developed countries have had time to at least partially prepare for the consequences of the aging process (eg. through the development of the social security system, finding solutions for extending employment opportunities for people over 60) (Crampton, 2009), less advanced socio-economic countries, including Poland, face a situation in which demographic changes are taking place so quickly that a fast reaction to the emerging challenges becomes difficult.

According to the data of the Central Statistical Office (CSO) from 2017, the population of Poland amounted to 38,315,463 (for comparison, in 2013 it counted 38,495,659 people) (CSO, 2017), from which 22,971,887 dwell in towns, and 15,343,576 in rural areas (CSO: Local Data Bank, 2017). From 2013 a negative natural increase has been observed in Poland. It amounted to -0.5 in 2013, and -0.7 in 2016. Similar negative trends characterize the actual increase, which in 2013 was negative, -0.1%. The decrease in population is a result of unfavourable tendencies in the scope of natural increase and emigration for permanent residence in foreign countries. In the post-war development of Poland, the highest decrease in population occurred in 2012-2013, due to a low number of births and an increased number of deaths (CSO, 2017). In 2013, one of the lowest numbers of live births was recorded – 369,600, and one of the highest numbers of deaths, 387,300. In 2014, the number of births was lower than the number of deaths by 1.3 thousand people, and in mid-2015 the negative natural increase reached 13,000. It is

believed that Poland has entered a period of demographic crisis, which can be permanent (Hrynkiewicz, Potrykowska, 2016).

According to the CSO forecasts, by 2050 significant changes in the size and demographic structure of the Polish population will occur. It is predicted, that the decline in the Polish population will reach almost 4.5 million people, in 2016 it was 38,369,000 people and in 2050, according to CSO estimates, it will decline to 33,950,000 people (CSO, 2014). According to the division into functional age groups related to professional activity, used in public statistics, it can be noted, that in 2013 the pre-working age group counted 6,995,362 people (18.2%), the working age group amounted to 24,422,146 people (63.4%), and the post-working population was 7,078,151 people (18.4%). The numbers for 2016, are, respectively: pre-working age group – 6,895,878, working age group: 23,767,614 and post-working age group: 7,769,500 (CSO, 2017). The division of working age population into mobile age group (15,337,852 people in 2013 and 15,021,934 in 2016) and immobile age group (9,084,294 people in 2013 and 8,745,680 in 2016) is an important indicator of the possibilities of utilizing human resources, social and cultural capital of this age group and its productive capacity. Human capital, not only in the form of education, skills and professional qualifications, but also in the form health, readiness to learn throughout life has measurable economic values and becomes a more important factor for effective production than classical means.

The perception of demographic change through the economic consequences is related to the question of the proportion between "producers" (labour) and "consumers". Achieving such increase in the productivity of people currently active in the labour market, which would compensate for the lack of employees, is impossible according to many analysts. This situation may lead to the weakening the economic growth of European countries, including Poland, and to the disturbance of the socio-economic order (Börsch-Supa, 2006). Expected demographic changes in the period from 2017 to 2050 will result in a significant increase in the population aged 60 and over. It is forecasted that it will come up to 4, 410, 866 people (from 9,288,921 people in 2017 to 13,699,788 people in 2050), which means that the age group of 60 years and over will constitute 40% of the population of Poland (CSO, 2014). Considering these changes, it should be noted that older people are a key group involved in sustainable development, and in many societies, they play significant roles. At the same time, this is the part of the population that is most exposed to the consequences of environmental changes (Łobodzińska, 2016).

3. Challenges resulting from demographic development

In the light of demographic forecasts, the development of the Polish population by 2050 will be characterized by the following features. First, the systematic population loss resulting from low fertility rates will not guarantee a simple replacement of generations. It is important

from the point of view of sustainable development to strengthen the prenatal elements of family policy. Only long-term and consistently implemented social policy prone to making procreative decisions can bring positive effects in the future (Waligórska, Witkowski, 2016). The second, extremely significant process resulting from the predicted demographic trends is the aging of the Polish society. The population of older people is characterized by specific needs in many areas, especially in the sphere of health and social care, education, labour market and integration with society (Węgrzyn, 2006).

In this context, the aging of the population entails multi-layered consequences for sustainable development and implementation of its assumptions. Among them, the most important seem to be those of economic aspects, primarily the shrinking of labour force resources and an increase in the number of professionally inactive people (pensioners) dependent on the care of people of working age. In this context, the process of double aging seems particularly important for Poland. In 2050, among nearly 40% of people aged 60 and more, the number of elderly in the so-called the fourth age group will be on the increase. This double aging will imply a faster growth in the percentage of people aged 80 and more than the general increase rate. According to the forecasts of the Central Statistical Office in 2017, the number of people aged 80 and more in towns will reach 1,020,794 people, which will constitute 2.6% of the population of Poland. Forecasts for 2050 predict a significant increase in the percentage of people in this age range. In cities, the expected number of people aged 80 and over will be 2,143,087, constituting 6.3% of the population of Poland. In rural areas in 2050, the number of people in this age group will amount to 1,394,411, or 4.1% of the population (CSO, 2017).

The main problem of people over 80 years old is a wide range of health issues and high demand for health care. People in the so-called the fourth age constitute a group with a very high probability of requiring care from other people and institutions. Considering the increasing number of people in that age, the healthcare infrastructure is clearly insufficient. In 2015, there were 41 geriatric departments in Poland with 1001 beds, where 25,510 patients were treated. This situation raises concerns that the constantly increasing number of older people will soon be deprived of sufficient medical care (CSO, 2017).

An issue important from the perspective of everyday life of people over 80 is informal and formal daily support. In the case of informal help – mainly family-based – this means increasing the burden on families by the need to find time to provide various services for the benefit of older members. In the case of formal assistance, the increase in number and share of very old people in the society means an increase in the need for social assistance houses, day-care homes and environmental care and care services funded from local government funds. Therefore, it should be expected that inhabitants of provinces with a low share of the oldest people in the future will be able to expect a generally wider range and higher quality of services provided by local governments compared to administrative units, in which the percentage of very old people will be relatively high and where the condition of the infrastructure will be insufficient.

4. Demographic changes and sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development has been present in the scientific and socio-economic debate since the 1960s. According to the commonly used definition, sustainable development is "a process aimed at satisfying the developmental aspirations of the present generation in a way that enables the same aspirations to be pursued by future generations" (United Nations, 1987, p. 17). However, irrespective of the adopted definitions, it must be agreed that sustainable development is one that meets current needs without jeopardizing the ability to meet the needs of future generations, and it is based on understanding two basic concepts – needs and limitations: "needs of the poorest in the world, which have to be prioritised, and limitations, i.e. imposed capacity of the environment to meet current and future needs by the state of technology and social organization" (United Nations, 1987, p. 17).

In this context, demographic changes that affect Polish society attract multi-layered implications for sustainable development and the achievement of its objectives. Among them, the most important seem to be those with an economic dimension, primarily shrinking of the labour force resources and an increase in the number of inactive people (pensioners) dependent on the care of people of working age.

From the point of view of the relationship between the implementation of sustainable development assumptions and the aging processes, health is of vital importance alongside with life expectancy. In 2012, the life expectancy for healthy life was over 80% of the forecasted life expectancy for men, which means that a man born in 2012 for the first 59 years will enjoy life without limitations caused by disability. For women, this period was 63 years (CSO, 2014). Alongside with the increasing period of life in health, the potentially high level of activity should get longer. This does not mean, however, that the extension of the period of life without any discomfort caused by disability will automatically translate into an increase in the level of activity among older adults. As in many European countries, the increasing life expectancy and improvement of health in Poland do not affect the extension of professional activity. More and more people are looking for the possibility of withdrawing from the labour market as early as possible. As the authors of the report "Social Activity of Older People" point out, many coordinated actions are required to increase this activity, including: ensuring equal access to the labour market, implementing good age management practices in workplaces, extending of preventive health actions, raising the level of physical activity of older adults, etc. (Czapiński, Błędowski, 2014).

5. Conclusion

By 2050, the percentage of older people will increase in every region in the world, and in the case of Poland, this age group will constitute 40% of the population. The growing percentage of older people in the population of Poland brings with it numerous consequences, and more importantly, older people are not only participants in sustainable development, but also its co-creators. Dynamic changes will also occur among the working-age population. On the one hand, this situation will partially solve the problem of unemployment due to the decreasing demographic pressure on the labour market. However, on the other hand, it is the demographic changes in the form of significant losses in the working age population which will result in a shortage of labour resources (Waligórska, Witkowski, 2016). The data and forecasts presented in the article indicate that in the face of demographic changes taking place in Poland, economic growth currently does not provide a chance to sufficiently prepare the society for an appropriate response to the challenges of an aging population.

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