

Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of Ageing Horizons

The last few years have seen a massive increase in research and debate on the social and economic implications of population ageing. There is a growing consensus that the conjunction of continuing increases in life expectancy and with low rates of fertility is likely to be a powerful engine of social change. Governments, international agencies, NGOs, academic researchers, think tanks are all putting an increasing amount of effort into identifying and analysing the challenges and opportunities that are likely to result from a permanent shift in the age structure of the population. This is reflected in the widening range of institutions and processes that are being scrutinised by policy analysts as well as the growing sophistication of the techniques that are used to project current trends into the medium term future and fledge out the details of alternative scenarios.

One of the most important aspects of this development has been the realisation that there is a difference between policy making for older people and policy making for ageing societies. Although policy making for an ageing society must surely consider the workings of institutions that distribute the benefits of social cooperation to older people, it will also consider the ways in which benefits and burdens, risks and opportunities, are allocated across the life course. Evidence-based policy making for an ageing society must take into account the interconnectedness of many of the institutions and processes that distribute benefits and burdens to people at different stages of their lives.

It is in the nature of evidence-based policy making that it should build on good empirical research. In this case, we want to know about the likely effects of population ageing on the many and varied institutions that make up our extraordinarily complex social life. We are asking about pressures and constraints that will make themselves felt in twenty or thirty years' time, not that far distant, but still outside the normal time horizon of most policy decisions. We are asking about what should be done now – or in the next few years – before these pressures and constraints really make themselves felt. This extension of the horizon of policy making so as to adapt our institutions to population ageing is the subject matter and theme of this new policy review.

The sheer quantity of the work that is being undertaken internationally on this matter – and the complexity of many of the question it raises – is the rationale for Ageing Horizons. The aim is not to

add to an already substantial flow of research papers and policy reports, but rather to take stock of recent work with a view to:

- informing policy makers and policy researchers of developments in the field;
- making a critical assessment of the contribution of current research to policy analysis;
- identifying unanswered questions and unresolved problems

Although some of these unanswered questions and unresolved problems will turn on matters of fact that are open to empirical enquiry, many of them will not. Differences of opinion about how society should adapt to the pressures and constraints of population ageing are bound to reflect different views about the preferred direction of social and political change. Differences of opinion about the policy decisions that should be made now will also reflect different views about policy making under conditions of uncertainty. Neither the feasibility nor the desirability of extending the time horizons of policy making to take account of risks and challenges that lie in the future should be taken for granted. Ageing Horizons will map out the main lines of controversy and disagreement about the policy issues – and the problems of policy making - raised by population ageing.

Pension reform and social justice

The theme for this first issue of Ageing Horizons is pension reform and social justice. What has done more than anything else to move population ageing out of the shadows of academic debate and into the political limelight is concern about economic costs; and fears about the sustainability of pension schemes have been the most common manifestation of this concern. The problems of adjusting pension arrangements to conditions of population ageing have already generated a very large literature. The contributors to this issue of Ageing Horizons all deal with the ways in which considerations of social justice enter into our assessments of the merits and defects of different arrangements and different kinds of adjustments. Arguments about generational justice are prominent in some recent high-profile proposals for reforming pension arrangements, especially in mainland Europe. Arguments about the part that public pensions have still to play in ensuring that retired people secure a fair share of society's output of goods and services are also prominent in criticism of these proposals. Debate about the problems of adjusting pension arrangements to conditions of population ageing cannot altogether circumvent these arguments. Even if we eventually come to the conclusion that neither kind of argument is going to be decisive in choosing between different arrangements for retirement income, we have no choice but to confront the arguments.