

Tackling the demographic challenge

From July 24th 2009, the Federal Republic of Germany will officially host SHARE, the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, as one of the three most important European research infrastructures. Supported by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, SHARE addresses one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century: population ageing.

SHARE observes the ageing processes of about 45.000 individuals in 15 European countries and Israel by measuring their health, socio-economic situation, family and social networks. Already three years after the first data release over 1300 registered users from the fields of demography, economics, epidemiology, gerontology, health policy, medicine, psychology, public health, sociology and statistics are working with the data.

The extensive multidisciplinary research based on SHARE clearly shows: demographic ageing surely encompasses many problems, but also great potentials:

- **Health**

One of the greatest potentials is that ageing Europeans are increasingly healthy and active. More than 65% of the respondents between 50 and 100 years say they are in good health, but there are huge differences between the European countries: Taking into account all criteria, Scandinavians for instance are healthier than their Mediterranean counterparts. SHARE also reveals interesting contradictions between subjective and objective health: For example, Germans rate their health a lot worse than it actually is, whereas Danes according to objective criteria such as grip strength and frequency of illnesses feel healthier than they are.

- **Family**

The family also still holds a lot of potential. Family relations all over Europe are characterized by multiple support. SHARE shows that the patterns of assistance differ substantially in the European countries: While in the South people mainly exchange intensive and obligatory support, in the North they rather provide voluntary sporadic private help. In Denmark for example the middle aged respondents help their older parents in almost 40 percent of the child-parent relations, on an average of two hours a week. In Italy, support is provided in only 15 percent of all relations, but on average around nine hours a week. Those differences can at least partly be ascribed to different social service regimes.

- **Labour**

SHARE also shows that the labour force at hand is not efficiently used. Only one third of the objectively and subjectively healthy Germans between 50 and 64 are still engaged in the labour market. In European comparison this number ranges from fifty percent in Scandinavia to around twenty percent in Southern and Eastern Europe. Differences are not only due to health, but also to institutional incentives and job quality in the European countries.

The future of SHARE

With the release of the third wave of data (SHARELIFE), researchers will get the chance to study detailed information on older Europeans' life courses. This sheds light on how societal changes affect individual behavior, enabling us to get prepared for future developments. In Germany, biomarkers will enhance the measurement of health impairments and provide new perspectives for health research. Not least, the number of respondents will be considerably increased to better understand the variety of different ageing processes, which will allow for detailed policy recommendations. SHARE will thus be strengthened and developed to be the central research instrument for research on ageing in Europe, alleviating the gap between the European Union and US American research infrastructures.

SHARE is centrally coordinated by the Mannheim Research Institute for the Economics of Aging (MEA). Contact: Prof. Axel Börsch-Supan, Ph.D. (director of SHARE) and Dr. Martina Brandt (public relations).

For further information please visit www.share-project.org.

