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Demographic Transition in Europe and Around the Mediterranean

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Introduction

Demographic trends underlie a great many economic and social processes. However, because populations tend to change relatively slowly, demography is often taken for granted and its impact under-appreciated. Rather like some slow geological process that is imperceptible in the short run, demographic change often has an ineluctable force, and ends up changing the whole social and economic landscape. When trying to understand the relationship between the European Union and its neighbours to the South and East of the Mediterranean, an understanding of the demographic forces at work is essential. In this chapter I will present an outline of the main demographic trends in Europe and the Mediterranean over the last half century, and will look forward to sketch the most likely developments for the coming decades. The EU and its neighbours do not only share the Mediterranean, we also share a common future and demographic trends will play a crucial role in determining the nature of that future.

For simplicity, I will mostly refer in this chapter to two geographically defined entities. One group is the 25 members of the European Union from 1 May 2004 (EU-25), which I shall also refer to simply as Europe. The other is a group of ten countries running in an arc from Turkey to Morocco (Med-10). The latter set excludes Israel, since that country has a very distinctive demographic profile, clearly different from Europe's other Mediterranean neighbours.

Of all demographic phenomena, immigration attracts by far the most attention in the media, and is addressed in detail in other chapters. However, it is easy to overlook the fact that international migration, in fact, has been a rather modest factor when compared to fertility and mortality.

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Over the last half century the net inflow of migrants from the rest of the world into the 25 countries that now comprise the EU has probably been between 10 and 15 million people. Over the same period, more than 300 million babies have been born in the EU-25. Even now, with net migration into Europe close to its historic high, and with fertility lower than ever before, the annual total of births in the EU is over four times the annual number of immigrants. The relative importance of migration may well increase in the future, but it is likely to remain a substantially smaller-scale process than fertility and mortality. In this chapter, therefore, I will mostly focus on trends in these more fundamental processes, and their role in determining the age structure. In doing so, I hope to provide a basis for seeing migration in its proper context.

Demographic transition and population growth

When demographers try to make sense of the complexities of the world around us, they make use of one of social science's great generalising models: the demographic transition. In association with many other aspects of modernisation, every population in the world undergoes a set of interconnected changes that is termed the demographic transition. As Paul Demeny (1972) has succinctly put it, 'In traditional societies, fertility and mortality are high. In modern societies, fertility and mortality are low. In between there is the demographic transition.' As a description of long-run trends, the demographic transition can be seen to be a universally applicable generalisation. At some point in the past, every population had high fertility (mostly between four and six children per woman) and high mortality (life expectancy varied between 20 and 40 years). With the spread of modern medicine and public health, mortality has improved; as family planning and contraceptive use became the norm, fertility has fallen. Usually mortality fell first, with a delay before fertility decline. This difference in timing leads to substantial population growth before the two processes come back into balance. The process of transition began in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and the neo-Europes overseas; it became a global phenomenon after World War Two. Today, more than half the world's people live in places where fertility is at or below the level needed for long-run intergenerational replacement (about 2.1 children per woman). Similarly, global life expectancy is approaching 70 years.

The differences in the timing and duration of the demographic transition have played the main role in determining the differences in population growth between Europe and the Med-10 countries. Europe's population