

Into the unknown

The world has never seen population ageing before. Can it cope?

Until the early 1990s nobody much thought about whole populations getting older. The UN had the foresight to convene a “world assembly on ageing” back in 1982, but that came and went. By 1994 the World Bank had noticed that something big was happening. (...)

For the next ten years a succession of books, mainly by Americans, sounded the alarm (...) and their message was stark: health-care systems were heading for the rocks, pensioners were taking young people to the cleaners, and soon there would be intergenerational warfare.

Since then the debate has become less emotional, not least because a lot more is known about the subject. (...) Population ageing is on every agenda, from G8 economic conferences to NATO summits. (...) The media, including this newspaper, are giving the subject extensive coverage. (...)

And if fertility in ageing countries does not pick up? It will not be the end of the world, at least not for quite a while yet, but the world will slowly become a different place. Older societies may be less innovative and more risk-averse than younger ones. By 2025 at the latest, about half the voters in America and most of those in western European countries will be over 50—and older people turn out to vote in much greater number than younger ones. Academic studies have found no evidence so far that older voters have used their clout at the ballot box to push for policies that specifically benefit them, though if in future there are many more of them they might start doing so.

Nor is there any sign of the intergenerational warfare predicted in the 1990s. After all, older people themselves mostly have families. In a recent study of parents and grown-up children in 11 European countries, Karsten Hank of Mannheim University found that 85% of them lived within 25km of each other and the majority of them were in touch at least once a week. (...)

Der vollständige Artikel erschien in The Economist am 25. Juni 2009.