Demographic policies can be thorny. Family policy is strongly linked with culture, and so easily and often politicised. Migration quickly gives way to questions of identity and economic uncertainty in a globalising world. Yet both are complex and can take years to bear fruit. They require a strong foundation in scientific expertise—not ideological preferences for one model of living over another.

To be sure, demographers are not immune from ideological persuasion. But a good demographer, like any good scientist, will have the strength of will and faith in the scientific method to accept results that do not agree with their worldview. Open discussion, peer review, international comparisons, and work in teams—especially international teams—are essential best practices here that should be fostered at every opportunity.

Policymakers should follow suit. Whether politicians, functionaries or stakeholders, they should be ready to accept difficult realities, work cooperatively, debate openly, invite scrutiny, and develop innovative solutions to today’s demographic challenges. In other words, they should base their work on scientific best practices as well as scientific knowledge. It will make their contribution, and the democratic process, much more meaningful.

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This issue is in collaboration with the Institute of Statistics and Demography at the Warsaw School of Economics, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the University of Southampton.

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Food for Thought

START WITH SCIENCE

As negotiations over Scotland’s fiscal future in the UK progressed earlier this year, one obstacle loomed ever larger: Scotland’s long-term low rate of population growth and falling support ratio, the number of people contributing to versus drawing from contribution-based social policies. Negotiators are right to fret. Falling support ratios make policies like pensions costlier for society and the economy. Scotland’s new fiscal arrangement must comply with the “no detriment” principle, but a differentially growing tax base makes indexing UK transfers to the region troublesome, politically and mathematically. At first glance, immigration seems to be a promising solution. The mechanism is simple. Migrants tend to be young and, in many cases, have more children than the average “native” European family. More young people mean higher population growth, slower ageing, and higher support ratios. But the long-term reality is more complicated. My forthcoming paper [1] shows how by examining the effects of long-term migration patterns. In Scotland, high levels of outward migration over the past 150 years indeed resulted in considerably lower population growth than for England and Wales in the twentieth century (Fig. 1). The departure of so many young, working age people, and their historically high fertility profile, also aged the population (Fig. 2). Yet, the population of England and Wales aged, too, at a nearly identical rate as Scotland’s, but with near-zero net migration: they have aged while growing.

This emphasises two things. First, an ageing population is not necessarily shrinking. Second, though affected by similar forces, population size and structure must be treated separately. Immigration is not a long-term solution for population ageing, and, because immigrants age, too, only for low population growth if continuously replenished. This is not to say Europe can shed its responsibility to manage migration humanely. However, it does mean that changing the age structure of a population is more complicated than opening borders.

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Figures in Focus

NO SILVER BULLET
MIGRATION IN AN AGEING SOCIETY

Source: Based on author’s calculation of Human Mortality Data
Cohabitation across Europe

Catching up with the new normal

In 2016, thousands of couples across Europe will decide to move in together—without getting married first. It makes sense. Sharing expenses cuts costs in an economy characterized by sluggish wage growth, and living together simply saves time. Plus, cohabitation connotes a certain level of commitment without the legal—and social—obligations that come with marriage. You might call it a baby step. Whatever the case, they won’t be alone. By 2010, nearly 40% of French couples between the ages 25 and 44 had chosen the cohabitation route, registered or unregistered. In Sweden, the figure was just over 50%—far cry from the near universality of marriage in the 1950s and ’60s. Childbearing within cohabitation has also become more frequent, with 25 to 30% of all children between 1995 and 2004 being born to cohabiting parents in the UK and the Netherlands. Clearly, cohabitation is not some youthful workaround to traditional rites, but an ever more institutionalised avenue for forming families.

RIPPLE EFFECTS

The trend has given rise to serious policy questions and a plethora of responses. Family law might seem contained enough, but one glance under the hood shows how integrally this policy area is bound up in others—property, inheritance, taxes, social security, leave, custody, and separation come to mind. Making room for cohabitation will ripple through much of a country’s welfare policy sphere, which has historically been based on marriage. But cohabitation’s expansion has motivated policymakers across Europe to have a go.

‘TIL DEATH, ETC., DO US PART

Results of reforms have varied. In the Netherlands, registered partnerships give couples the same rights in terms of alimony and joint assets, to inheritance and widow(er)’s pensions, and to jointly declare income tax. The French PACS (pacte civil de solidarité) is a contract that allows couples to define their property relations and that gives them a number of social and fiscal rights, but these rights are not always as extensive as those for married spouses. In Sweden, an early mover here, no registration is necessary. Cohabiting couples automatically benefit from certain protections in case of separation or death, provided that both partners are unmarried, but coverage is not as comprehensive as in the Netherlands or France. Meanwhile, Spain has left its regions to regulate areas like joint assets and social security for cohabitants. Lithuania modestly makes any provisions at all. The supply of protections does not necessarily line up with demand. Ukraine offers quite thorough coverage for cohabiting couples despite low levels of cohabitation. Take-up of the Netherlands’ generous protections for registered partnerships has also been modest. Estonia on the other hand has one of the highest levels of cohabitation in Europe, but has moved slowly to provide rights to cohabiting partners in the case of death, separation or unemployment.

BABY STEPS

Clearly, legislating for cohabitation is tricky business—if it weren’t, coverage would simply line up with demand. But legal traditions vary and family policies, strongly related to cultural values, are readily politicised. One way around this is to focus on the wellbeing of the children of cohabiting parents, at least to start. In this way, policymakers can steer clear of prickly questions while simultaneously benefitting from existing research. It would also facilitate the mobility of cohabiting EU couples, who in principle have the right to cross borders to make a living. Establishing thorough cohabitation regimes will be difficult. Governments should still try to keep up. Focusing only on children is not a long term solution, but it’s a start. You might call it a baby step.

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