



Distr.  
GENERAL

LC/G.2170(SES.29/16)  
27 March 2002

ENGLISH  
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

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Twenty-ninth session  
Brasilia, Brazil, 6-10 May 2002

**SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VULNERABILITY: OLD AND NEW RISKS  
FOR COMMUNITIES, HOUSEHOLDS AND INDIVIDUALS**

**Summary and conclusions**

02-3-170

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## FOREWORD

At the meeting of the Ad-hoc Committee on Population and Development of the ECLAC session held in Mexico City in April 2000, the delegations requested the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE), ECLAC Population Division, to prepare a document on “Social vulnerability: communities, households and individuals”, and this mandate was embodied in resolution 577(XXVIII) of the Commission. In response to this request, the present document gives a summary of the basic ideas, substantive content, empirical findings, policy criteria and conclusions of the study on socio-demographic vulnerability in Latin America and the Caribbean carried out by CELADE during the two-year period 2000-2001. This study has resulted in a number of expert meetings, workshops and seminars, several publications which have already been circulated, and two reference documents, one dealing specifically with the area covered by the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean in Port of Spain and the other, more extensive document dealing with the region as a whole.

CELADE was able to devote its efforts to the study of social and socio-demographic vulnerability thanks to the valuable support provided by other divisions of ECLAC and the technical and financial collaboration of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Regional Delegation for Cooperation of the French Government, through its Embassy in Chile. The work was facilitated by the valuable ongoing interaction with various national and international socio-demographic research centres, as well as a fruitful exchange of substantive ideas with specialists in this field. Even so, the study entrusted to CELADE turned out to be a challenge which it sometimes seemed would be difficult to fulfill, largely because of the many-faceted nature of the notion of vulnerability. It was therefore necessary to undertake an arduous process of specification and delimitation of concepts, analytical procedures and relevant information. The meetings held played a decisive role in this respect, because —as reported at the meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Ad-hoc Committee on Population and Development held in Santiago in December 2001— the discussions that took place at those meetings made it possible to concentrate the analysis on the socio-demographic aspects of vulnerability and to consider it more as an analytical approach than as a conceptual category.

In short, then, this document basically aims to apply a vulnerability-oriented approach to the analysis of the relations between population and development at the community, household and personal levels. Its main contribution is that, in addition to offering a novel view of persistent and emerging socio-demographic matters, it provides a bridge to one of the most important and extensively debated issues of the present time: social vulnerability.

### 1. What is meant by vulnerability?: a first approximation

Vulnerability means “the quality or state of being vulnerable” (dictionary.oed.com), and is applied to that which “may be wounded or harmed” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*). In order for damage to be done, three components must be present: the existence of a potentially adverse event —i.e., a risk, which may be exogenous or endogenous—, incapacity to respond to such a state of affairs —either because of one’s own lack of suitable defences or the absence of outside sources of support— and inability to adapt to the new situation generated by the materialization of the risk.

Taking into account these three components —risks, inability to respond and inability to adapt actively— vulnerability becomes not only a concept or notion but also a useful and powerful approach for analysing different aspects of real situations. Various different accepted views of vulnerability have been used for some time now in such fields as law, food security, macroeconomics, medicine (as for example in adolescent psychiatry) and natural disaster prevention. This diversity shows that there is no

single univocal definition of vulnerability: its use only makes sense in connection with the probability of being involved in clearly identified potentially harmful events such as authoritarian rule, famines, economic depressions, psychopathologies of adolescence, or floods.

## **2. Social vulnerability and vulnerable groups**

The use of the notion of vulnerability to refer to specific groups of the population has a long history in social analysis and social policies. It is used, firstly, to identify groups which are in a situation of “social risk”: i.e., groups made up of individuals who, because of factors typical of their domestic or community environment, are more likely to display anomic forms of conduct (aggressiveness, delinquency, drug addiction), to suffer different forms of harm by the action or omission of others (intra-family violence, attacks in the street, malnutrition), or to display inadequate levels of performance in key areas for social inclusion (such as schooling, work or interpersonal relations).

A second type of use of the expression “vulnerable groups” is to identify segments of the population which, because they act in line with a common pattern of conduct, are more likely to be victims of some harmful event: one example is that of persons practicing prostitution, who are thereby more exposed to the risk of catching venereal diseases.

The third and most frequent type of use is to identify groups sharing some basic common feature (age, sex, ethnic origin or territorial location) which is considered a generating similar shared problems; these groups may therefore be selected as the beneficiaries of sectoral programmes or specific public policies.

Although these three types of use have their own analytical merits and applications, their emphasis on the identification of population groups warranting special forms of treatment somewhat overlooks the fundamental aspect of the notion of vulnerability: the recognition of the relevant risks. In other words, those types of use do not seek to answer such questions as: what are the risks? what is their tendency? or what forces are responsible for them? Moreover, as the identification of the groups—especially in the third case mentioned—is usually of a generic nature, it neglects basic internal distinctions which may be connected with the response capacity and adaptability of the persons or groups affected.

## **3. Social vulnerability: a spreading and useful but polysemous category**

As may be gathered from the foregoing considerations, the recent spread of the concept of vulnerability is not due to actual studies of vulnerable groups: it is due rather to three lines of social analysis which use this notion in different contexts and with different objectives and meanings.

### **a) Social vulnerability and modernity**

There is currently a vigorous literature aimed at understanding the different ways of producing, living together and existing that present-day modernity involves (high modernity, in the words of A. Giddens). A number of authors (Beck, Castells, Giddens, Lash, Sennet and others) hold that the extension of reflexivity to all aspects of human life is the most distinctive feature of this modernity. This means that the actors and institutions of society review their practices every day—something that can be quite bemusing—using continual flows of information and knowledge which they interpret in accordance with their own rationale and interests. In the case of individuals, this process opens up more

spaces for individual freedom and hence tends to make individual projects take precedence over those of the family or community. Thus, present-day modernity faces all the social actors with the attractive challenge of “forging their own destiny”. This process is not devoid of obstacles, however, since it does not ensure equitable sharing of the means for successfully tackling that challenge, undermines the traditional sources of support, solidarity, security and confidence, and heightens uncertainty about the future (“fabricated uncertainty” as Giddens says (Giddens, 1997)). In a world of constant rapid change, doubt about tomorrow permeates all areas of human activity, even including those where stability used to be considered of crucial importance, such as employment, the family or one’s dwelling-place. Thus, modern societies—which have shown enormous talent for doing away with outside threats such as famines and epidemics and for extending and consolidating the rights of individuals to take reflexive decisions on their behaviour—generate new risks and factors of uncertainty.

Although this line of analysis has as its empirical reference the developed societies<sup>1</sup> which come within the cultural matrix of the West, its arguments are not totally alien to Latin American and Caribbean conditions. Firstly, because (subject to certain specific features and hybrid manifestations) the region does indeed come within that cultural matrix. Secondly, because some components of cultural modernity have shown that they have a greater capacity for spreading and becoming established than economic and social modernization. Thirdly, because the globalization process currently under way means that all the regions of the world are more closely interconnected (especially at the symbolic level). And finally, because some of the pillars of the actual functioning of late modernity in the developed societies of the West—such as flexibility (Sennet, 2000) and the reflexive calculation of options (Giddens, 1997b)—have been incorporated very rapidly into the discourse and practice of the Latin American and Caribbean social actors. In short, the vulnerability associated with this “fabricated uncertainty” also affects the social actors of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## **b) Social vulnerability, lack of protection and asymmetries**

The debate on the forms of social protection is heated and intense (EC-ESA, 2001; Ocampo, 2001; IDB, 2000; Esping Andersen, 2000; ECLAC, 2000b; Sojo, 1999), and the notion of vulnerability often appears among its central elements.

Part of this debate reflects the polarized positions of those who mistrust public action and those who doubt the effectiveness of the market for protecting the weakest communities, households and individuals. This includes the bulk of the discussions on the crisis, options and future of the Welfare State in the developed countries, especially those of Western Europe. In this case, the question of social vulnerability is only secondary, since the debate is organized along the lines of more classical distinctions: freedom versus equality; individual enterprise or solidarity; welfare versus workfare programmes; or inclusion versus exclusion.

Another part of the debate is connected with the arguments about present-day modernity already outlined earlier. Fabricated uncertainty is not just an academic speculation, since its results are reflected in social actors who win or lose; sometimes only minor skirmishes are involved, but in other cases the actors’ whole future is at stake. Protecting the losers is therefore of crucial importance. At the same time, however, social protection based on insurance mechanisms is weakening, as modern risks are hard to predict and tend to be catastrophic, they are personalized, and they continue to be cumulative, which represents an obstacle to the expansion of private insurance (Esping-Andersen, 2000). Thus, the answer

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<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, these societies are highly complex, with high levels of productivity, good average living conditions, great technological sophistication, a wide range of specialized services, and great emphasis on symbolic forms of work and those making intensive use of information and knowledge.

to modern vulnerability does not appear to lie in the proliferation of public or private insurance systems. These schemes will continue to be of fundamental importance, but they will have to be accompanied by actions designed to train or enable the social actors to confront the risks actively.

A third part of the debate, which is particularly relevant for Latin America and the Caribbean, concerns the inherent insecurity of the economic and social system which has become established in the region since the 1980s, whose basic elements are: external openness, expansion of the market mechanisms, and reduction of the role of the State. External openness affects sectors of production (and the communities and individuals linked with them) which previously enjoyed various forms of protection; furthermore, in a context of international economic relations which are essentially asymmetrical—and unfavourable to the countries of the region—this openness means that the national economies are more sensitive to international fluctuations, as shown by the fact that there have been three economic crises in less than ten years (Ocampo, 2002). The expansion of the market mechanisms in highly segmented societies leads to competition between individuals with very disparate conditions of origin: unless those who started off with disadvantages are given the benefit of some kind of compensatory action, the winners and losers are virtually decided in advance and the competition simply ends up reproducing the original conditions of inequality (Ocampo, 2001; ECLAC, 2000a). In this respect, the persistent economic and social inequality affecting the region means that the uncertainty felt by individuals about the future will follow a distribution pattern not very different from that of resource distribution. The reduction of the role of the State affects social sectors and groups which had always enjoyed public guarantees in the past. The middle classes are emblematic in this respect: albeit with great differences between countries, their growth and consolidation has been aided by public-sector services and transfers and, in general, by their closer relations with the political powers. For the middle classes, the unilateral withdrawal of the State from areas which were vital for them—employment, and above all education—and the increasing targeting of resources on the poorest sectors have left great segments of them without protection.

The last component in this debate includes some of the above-mentioned arguments but places emphasis on the erosion of the solidarity and support mechanisms—essentially of a collective nature—which helped to some extent to offset historical asymmetries. In particular, the defencelessness of workers vis-a-vis employers and the fragmentation observed in lower-class communities have left the weakest social groups at a marked disadvantage in any attempt to negotiate agreements or carry through autonomous projects.

### **c) Social vulnerability and assets**

The use of the notion of poverty—and especially of its measurement, based ultimately on household income—to identify abnormal social situations and guide policies has probably been the main stimulus for the development of vulnerability-based approaches. There is no suggestion that poverty is an obsolete concept and that social vulnerability has now taken its place: nothing could be further from reality, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, which has registered little progress in reducing poverty over the last 20 years. What is really being suggested is that estimates of poverty give a static picture of an essentially dynamic phenomenon; a significant number of households located around the poverty line rise above and fall below it in a relatively random manner. A number of studies indicate that households with incomes of between 0.9 and 1.25 poverty lines are vulnerable to poverty, since even slight economic fluctuations can turn them into poor households in terms of income.

Even more important than the foregoing is the fact that poverty in terms of income is due to the lack of assets such as physical belongings, financial savings, social capital and even some patterns of behaviour, etc., so that policies designed to eradicate poverty should intervene to change the situation

regarding the endowment of assets of communities, households and individuals. This does not mean that transfers of income to the poor are no use, but it does shed doubts on their long-term effect, since temporary improvements in family income do not remedy the deficit of assets of the poor.

Thus, lack of assets, their loss of value or inability to manage them properly form the distinctive sign of vulnerability to two social risks of capital importance: poverty, and downward economic and social mobility. In this context, vulnerability takes on special importance, since it delimits these two risks to which communities, households and individuals are vulnerable. It also serves to interpret phenomena like those already referred to earlier; thus, the erosion of community links or the loss of State transfers may be considered as a dilution of assets, while the devaluation of education (and of knowledge in general) because of the dizzy rate of change accompanying late modernity is the best example of the obsolescence of assets.

This view of social vulnerability as a deficiency of assets permits a wide range of applied approaches which are significantly different from each other. The earliest such approaches (Glewwe and Hall, 1995; Moser, 1998) concentrated on the way the poor mobilize assets to keep their heads above water and face crises, since the strengthening of such assets would reduce the effects of economic shocks on the poor. Other approaches (Attanasio and Zsékely, 2000) focus on the assets that allow the poor to generate income and hence sustainably overcome their precarious situation. Finally, some approaches which do not agree with the idea that vulnerability is simply a deficit of suitable bases or a problem of ownership or management of assets lay stress on the imbalance between the available assets and the structure of opportunities shaped by the market, the State and the community (Filgueira, 2001 and 1998; Kztzman and others, 1999).<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Social vulnerability and population variables: a first approximation**

The debate and empirical research on social vulnerability incorporate population variables in various forms and thus provide a first element for tackling socio-demographic vulnerability (ECLAC, 2001e and 2000a; Kztzman and Filgueira, 2001; Filgueira, 2001 and 1998; Kztzman and others, 1999; Moser, 1998; Glewwe and Hall, 1995).

There is evidence that the households most vulnerable to economic crises —those which suffer the biggest drops in income or domestic consumption— are those which have a high demographic dependence ratio (because of a relatively large number of children or old people). One of the assets that poor households can mobilize to cope with economic crises is the labour supply of their members, which is restricted in the case of households with high indices of demographic dependence or lack some key member (such as single-parent households), wither because there is an objective limitation of that supply or because its mobilization involves social or even physical problems (as in the case of children and old people). Poor communities, households and individuals have a greater probability of registering high levels of fertility and mortality, which are conditions that act as links in the chain of poverty reproduction.

When a comparison is made between old and new social risks, this brings out the role played by population variables: population ageing, adolescent fertility and the location of the population within

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<sup>2</sup> Structures of opportunities are “the probabilities of access to goods, services or activities which affect the well-being of the household because they facilitate the use of its existing resources or provide new ones which are useful for social mobility and integration through the existing channels” (Kztzman, 2000, p. 299). Thus, conditions of vulnerability depend on the assets available and the probabilities of having access to them by taking advantage of the options provided by the State, the market and the community. It is also argued that the structures of opportunities determine the value of assets, because they define the returns on them (Kztzman and Filgueira, 2001).

cities (especially intra-metropolitan socio-economic residential segregation) are persistent or emerging risks in Latin America and the Caribbean. Similarly, the remodelling and deconstructing of families—an eminently socio-demographic phenomenon— involves growing risks for the process of bringing up children, who are increasingly exposed to the danger of living in broken single-parent homes.

### **5. Socio-demographic vulnerability: a working definition**

The socio-demographic dynamics and profiles of communities, households and individuals can usefully be analysed using a vulnerability approach. A logical sequence of such an analysis comprises the following steps: (i) delimitation of socio-demographic risk scenarios associated with “long-run demographic processes”; (ii) identification of social biases which become evident when those risks materialize; and (iii) evaluation of the response capacity and adaptability of communities, households and individuals most likely to be exposed to these risks.

There are at least three reasons for speaking of socio-demographic vulnerability rather than simply demographic vulnerability. The first is that the population variables—except for a few such as mortality—are not risks in themselves: they will only become risks in so far as their adverse effects undermine social performance (routines, obligations and improvements) or hinder the exercise of rights. The second reason is that exposure to the risks is differentiated according to the socio-economic and cultural segments people belong to. And the third reason is that response capacity and adaptability are eminently social matters, since they are connected with the availability of the relevant assets, the visibility and bargaining power of the social actors, public policies, and the opportunities available.

In short, socio-demographic vulnerability is a syndrome combining potentially adverse socio-demographic events (risks), incapacity to respond to the materialization of those risks, and inability to adapt actively to the new situation generated by that materialization. In order for there to be socio-demographic vulnerability, those three components must be present, but even the simultaneous presence of the first two of them is sufficient to create a situation which is harmful in the short term, since all adaptation processes take time and may involve losses compared with the initial situation. The ability for active adaptation means having the ability to handle situations and adjust to them with minimum losses; fatalistic acceptance of risks amounts to mere resignation (inability to adapt actively).

Although all of the three components in question are equally important, only the first of them (the risk) can be described exclusively through population variables, especially long-run demographic processes; the other two are contingent and depend on essentially social factors. Consequently, the generalizations of the empirical analysis given below will mostly refer to the identification and description of situations of socio-demographic risk.

### **6. Socio-demographic vulnerability: a strategic view of risk situations**

Among the social disciplines, demography stands out by its capacity to anticipate population situations, including those involving socio-demographic risks. This is due largely to the fact that the fundamental processes of demographic change take place over relatively long periods of time, even as much as centuries; moreover, they have the special feature that they begin in some zones and then spread, gradually and with specific differences in each case, all over the world. These two attributes increase the possibilities of making forecasts that come true (Vallin, 1994).

These fundamental demographic changes are similar to the “long-run historical processes” identified by the French historian Fernand Braudel; they are not inexorable “laws”—since nothing

guarantees that they will spread to the whole of mankind or that their final form of propagation will follow a common pattern— but rather probable changes. Among these changes, three stand out in particular: the demographic transition, the urban transition, and the second demographic transition. The first and second of these are well known, but the third is still at an incipient stage and is only clearly visible in the developed countries.

The fundamental feature of the demographic transition is the sustained decline in the birth and mortality rates from high to low levels, which, in the long run, reduces population growth and leads to population ageing. In the case of the urban transition and that relating to mobility, the main feature is the sustained increase in the urban portion of the population and, at the same time, the weight of migrations between and within cities. Broadly speaking, the second demographic transition may be described as the postponement —sometimes definitive— of nuptial and reproductive initiation and changes in the institution of marriage, which becomes less formal and more fragile. Each of these processes gives rise to the relevant socio-demographic risk profiles for communities, households and individuals, so they are used as the main guidelines for investigating socio-demographic vulnerability in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **7. Delays in the demographic transition: persistence of traditional risks**

The demographic transition is a process involving the reduction of four risks: high mortality, high fertility, rapid population growth, and a youthful age structure, which means high levels of child dependence. Declines in the first two directly affect individuals, as they represent the exercise of fundamental human rights —the most essential right of all, which is the right to life, and the basic right of couples to decide the number of children they are going to have— and at the same time they favour the achievement of individual projects, since they expand and free the time available for accumulating assets, especially in the case of women; declines in these risks also reflect better conditions in terms of health and, ultimately, human capital. The other two risks concern households and communities, since their reduction relieves pressures on community and domestic budgets and thus facilitates the productive reallocation of resources and time. Furthermore, declines in fertility and child dependence open up greater possibilities for diversifying and strengthening the place of women in their communities and help to establish more equitable relations within the family.

The rapid demographic transition undergone by the region illustrates these changes in the risk profile. Between 1950 and 2000 there was a sustained decline in fertility and mortality, and at the same time population growth slackened, the base of the population pyramid was broadened, and there was a reduction in the number of children per household. All in all, there was a significant reduction in the lack of control over two aspects of vital importance to individuals: health and reproduction. The threat of a population explosion was left behind, as was that of an extremely youthful age structure, which would have seriously diluted community and household resources.

The evidence shows that the countries of the region are in the midst of the demographic transition and that in a number of them this process is extending to a greater or lesser extent to practically all the social strata (as shown by the low infant mortality among the poor in Chile or the systematic decline in fertility in rural areas of Brazil). The data also indicate, however, that progress in the demographic transition has varied considerably among and within the countries. The poorest national and subnational communities still register the highest rates of fertility and mortality, and within the countries the poorest and most excluded groups, especially indigenous peoples, are systematically lagging furthest behind in this transition. Thus, the actors most exposed to the socio-demographic risks inherent in delays in transition are precisely those which have less capacity to respond to those risks when they materialize. The national and subnational communities with the smallest budgets are those that have to cope with a

higher rate of expansion of social demands; on average, the households and individuals with least resources are those with most children to bring up and most health problems to face. Moreover, the ability to adapt actively to the socio-demographic risk situation characteristic of a delayed transition is limited by perverse aspects such as the confinement of women in the home, child labour, and the unilateral transfer —tinged with biases of sex and generation— of the responsibilities for bringing up children.

Ultimately, delays in the transition continue to be the main element in the demographic dynamics of poverty, which are still the most acute and widespread manifestation of socio-demographic vulnerability among communities, households and individuals in the region. It may therefore be concluded that progress in the demographic transition among the most under-privileged communities, households and individuals would reduce this vulnerability. This conclusion must be toned down for at least three reasons, however. The first is that progress in the transition not only does not reduce all the risks it theoretically should, as is shown by the persistence of high rates of adolescent fertility, but also sparks off other emerging problems, such as population ageing. The second reason is that there are other socio-demographic risks which depend on the other transitions already referred to. The third is that progress in the demographic transition does not of itself guarantee the achievement of community, household and individual projects; that is to say, it does not ensure the reduction of social vulnerability, since there are many other risks that are outside the demographic field. Development continues to be elusive in the region; despite the reduction in the average number of children in them, households still face budgetary constraints, and individuals, who now have more time for their training, still display serious shortcomings in terms of human capital. Moreover, the somewhat easier conditions deriving from the transition, which will only exist for a limited time, are not being properly used by the countries of the region (as shown by the scanty progress in the quality of education and in employment levels in communities where the school population and the population of working age are stabilized or growing only moderately).

Contrary to a belief which is deeply rooted among decision-makers, the sustained declines in fertility and mortality do not put an end to socio-demographic risks, even in cases where the transition extends to all social strata and is moving towards a point where population growth is contained or stabilized. Briefly, this transition does away with some obstacles, consolidates the exercise of rights and opens up opportunities, but it does not do away with socio-demographic vulnerability, tending rather to remodel it, and nor does it guarantee of itself the achievement of the social and economic aspirations of communities, households and individuals.

### **8. Early reproduction: a stubborn risk which takes various forms**

It is generally agreed that adolescent fertility has adverse consequences for all concerned. The parents are obliged to take on roles for which they are not yet prepared (socially, financially, psychologically and even physically), to improvise decisions, and to cancel options, all of which adversely affects their progress in life and jeopardizes the stability of the couple and the process of bringing up children. The families of these adolescent parents, as their main support institution, have to transfer resources to them or share with them. The community, for its part, suffers the exit from the educational system of human resources which are in the midst of their training process. Although there are situations in which these adverse effects can be reduced through various factors —depending on the age of the mother, personality considerations or the social and cultural context (when adolescent fertility is a form of conduct highly valued by the community)— the general verdict is that reproduction during adolescence should be avoided (Guzmán and others, 2001; ECLAC, 2001c and 2001g).

Early reproduction is a particularly serious risk in Latin America and the Caribbean, for various reasons. Adolescent fertility has gone down much less than that of other age groups, and in some countries—including those which have made most progress in the demographic transition—it has even gone up recently. Moreover, it is subject to patterns of conduct which involve different vulnerability conditions, and the adverse effects associated with it become even more marked as modernity advances.

Part of the adolescent fertility observed in Latin America and the Caribbean occurs in contexts of generally high rates of reproduction, in national and subnational communities which are relatively backward in terms of economic and social development, as in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (ECLAC, 2001c; ECLAC, 1998 and 2001g). In these communities, the trio of initiations (sexual, nuptial and reproductive) take place early, and usually at short intervals; girls form unions for the purpose of reproduction and initiate their fertile stage during adolescence. The fact that this reproductive pattern, which is typical of a delayed transition, is linked with socio-cultural standards that limit the role of women to domestic activities and reproduction does not make it any less harmful.

Another part of adolescent fertility occurs in contexts of higher economic and social development and more advanced demographic transitions. In these cases, social requirements come into conflict with early unions and fertility, giving rise to incompatibility between the roles assigned to girls and boys and the obligations of living together as a couple and bringing up children. As this incompatibility does not apply to sexuality during adolescence, however (which is seen, on the contrary, as a symbol of sexual modernity), many boys and girls begin their sexual activity at an early age, outside of stable unions. For cultural, family, institutional or individual reasons, however, most of these boys and girls do not have access to modern contraceptive media, or do not use them properly; thus, in some countries with apparently high indexes of the use of contraceptives among adolescents, such as Jamaica, high rates of early fertility are nevertheless observed (NFPB, 1999). As it is generally not wanted and occurs outside stable unions, early fertility is accompanied by disadvantages and stigmas. A pattern of “distorted sexual and reproductive modernity”<sup>3</sup> is established which exists alongside that typical of delayed transitions.

The coexistence of these two patterns is linked with national and subnational cultural idiosyncrasies, which have a decisive influence on reproductive behaviour. Thus, at the individual country level, the relation between the intensity of the risk (the adolescent fertility rate) and the response capacity (depending on the level of economic and social development) is less marked than in the case of risks directly deriving from delayed demographic transition. The data on the Caribbean are instructive in this respect, as Jamaica and the Dominican Republic have significantly higher adolescent fertility rates than Haiti ([www.measuredhs.com](http://www.measuredhs.com); [www.measureprogram.org](http://www.measureprogram.org)). This is not the case at the level of households and individuals, since adolescent fertility is considerably higher among the poorer groups.

As a high level of adolescent fertility is a component of the demographic dynamics of poverty, it gives rise to a situation of acute vulnerability, as the risk affects those who have the least capacity to respond. As poor adolescent parents and their families do not have accumulated resources for paying for the upbringing of children, they have very few options and none of them are very promising: entering the labour force (which makes their training process more difficult), redistributing responsibilities through their support networks (normally their families), or simply refusing to assume their obligations (which often ends up affecting not only the child but also the adolescent mother or the grandmothers). There is usually little possibility of turning to some institution for support in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> True sexual and reproductive modernity exists when the absence of an automatic connection between sexual activity and reproduction is accepted or promoted and there is free access to the means of ensuring it. In the case of adolescents, distorted sexual and reproductive modernity occurs when there is a breach between acceptance of the absence of such a connection and ready access to contraceptives (and their proper use).

Although adolescent fathers or mothers who belong to groups that enjoy better economic and social conditions have more possibilities of being able to cover the financial obligations of bringing up children, using their capacity for mobilizing domestic resources is a matter for decisions by the family. Since most of their pregnancies come under the “distorted sexual and reproductive modernity” pattern, they are most likely unwanted or occur outside a stable union, which brings the other actor in this situation of vulnerability into the problem, because the child to be born requires not only material resources but also the devotion and affection of its parents.

The vulnerability associated with adolescent fertility has an obvious gender bias, not so much biological as socio-cultural. Apart from the paradox that the average age of sexual initiation is lower among boys but the average age at which they have their first child is lower among girls (reflecting a higher degree of protection among boys), the evidence suggests that male irresponsibility is a particularly serious matter for concern as regards adolescent pregnancies; even worse, there are signs of an increase in the proportion of adolescent mothers who have no stable partner (ECLAC, 2001c; Guzmán and others, 2001).

In short, there is no room in modern society for condescending attitudes to early fertility. The time, resources and affective involvement demanded by bringing up a child, which are already a tough proposition for adults, are probably quite beyond boys and girls who are in the midst of their formative years and deserve a breathing space to accumulate assets, define their identities, and develop a project for their future lives. The lack of other alternatives doubtless leads some adolescents, male and female, to see motherhood or fatherhood as an option for life; in this respect, expansion of the opportunities available for young people of both sexes would help to obviate untimely and irreversible decisions. In cases where there is a traditional cultural pattern underlying adolescent fertility, determined action on the symbolic level is called for. Finally, much of adolescent fertility could be avoided by tackling the three initiations —sexual, nuptial and reproductive— with a coherent discourse and social policy.

### **9. Disparity between expectations and the reproductive experience: a risk that still persists and another which is now emerging**

The definition of risk used here has two components: one related with performance and the other related with the exercise of rights. This does not mean that both are completely synchronic with each other, as is shown by the contrast between the right of an adolescent to have a child if she wants, on the one hand, and the adversities that that decision can bring for her and her child, on the other. There is only one valid outcome in this confrontation: the person’s right must have priority over the objective consequences of the action; only the possibility of violating other rights (of individuals or groups of individuals) justifies questioning the exercise of a person’s basic to reproduction. This priority of rights does not mean that other actors (especially of the public sector) can be left out of the reckoning; indeed, the erosion of the material and cultural bases of high levels of fertility has been furthered by public and private campaigns, although of course if these campaigns try to impose a particular form of conduct they will be undermining a right and the action in question will lose its legitimacy; in this respect, the coercive tone of some mass female sterilization programmes has given rise to serious reservations (Chant, 1999).

The argument that the demographic transition leads to the reduction of the risk of high fertility is based not only on the performance dimension, but also that of rights, since the decline in fertility, by definition, reflects a growing degree of control over decisions regarding reproduction. Because the right to reproduction is a basic human right, however, such control must be the result of an aspiration —that of having fewer children— and not of imposed forms of conduct. The background information available shows that already in the 1960s the idea of having fewer children was widespread in the region; more

recently, specialized surveys reveal that both the desired and the observed levels of fertility are increasingly homogeneously distributed throughout the different socio-economic groups.<sup>4</sup>

In theory, once advanced stages of the demographic transition are reached the number of children should reflect the population's reproductive aspirations, but this assumption contrasts with two risks that are revealed by experience. The first is an upward trend in unwanted fertility: a phenomenon observed in countries where reproductive aspirations go down more rapidly than the observed fertility. The second is that the difference between aspirations and reality may reflect an inability to fulfill reproductive aspirations, which is equivalent to "unattained" fertility (or under-fertility). Moreover, in all contexts there is the risk of coercion, whether to have or not to have children.

The evidence suggests that, in spite of the progress made in the demographic transition, there are still high levels of unwanted fertility in countries at various stages in the transition. This is an indication of shortcomings in the reproductive health and family planning services, either in terms of coverage, timeliness or proper training of users, but it also shows that these services face constant challenges of updating and adjustment as reproductive expectations fall more quickly than observed fertility.

Since the indicators of unwanted fertility do not permit the assessment of unattained fertility, the use of a procedure based on the question "number of children wanted" (a question which is not devoid of controversy) would make it possible to detect whether this risk exists in the region; as the aggregate figures do not reflect this, individualized measurements must be made. Thus, the results of specialized surveys show that an "excess" of children is rare among women of high economic and social level but frequent among those of a low economic and social level; the same results show that among the former group the observed fertility is often lower than that desired. In reality, the progress of the demographic transition has thus failed to fulfill one of its main promises —coincidence of desired and observed fertility— even in the case of the richest groups.

It should be noted, at all events, that the two risks are not comparable. This lack of comparability is not due to economic and social disparities —which suggest that women and couples affected by under-fertility should have a greater response capacity— nor is it due to the dilemmas posed by the question used, which tends to put interviewees in a normative or ideal scenario. Instead, the lack of comparability is due to the fact that over-fertility reflects a right which is not fulfilled because of the lack of services which would allow it to be tackled —especially reproductive health, family planning and responsible parenthood services— while under-fertility reflects opposing options such as, for example, having another child or improving one's future in terms of employment. Under-fertility is nevertheless an important risk which warrants an institutional response, since it is a source of potential conflicts between rights, especially for women. It is also important because under-fertility is not always the result of free choice, since sometimes it is the only alternative in situations where women do not have sufficient time or material resources: a frequent problem for middle- and lower middle-class urban working women, while women will never have a completely free choice in this respect as long as responsibility for the upbringing of children is inequitably assigned on a gender basis.

## **10. Changes in the age structure: population "waves" and ageing**

As already noted, the demographic transition gives rise to new risks. Leaving aside a long-standing level of fertility below the replacement level, which is not yet clearly visible in Latin America and the

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<sup>4</sup> There is a valuable range of specialized surveys, including in particular the World Fertility Survey, the Contraceptive Prevalence Surveys, the Demographic and Health Surveys ([www.measuredhs.com](http://www.measuredhs.com)) and the Reproductive Health Surveys ([www.measureprogram.org](http://www.measureprogram.org)).

Caribbean —and which may be considered as a feature of the second demographic transition— progress in the transition brings up two risks connected with the changes caused in the age structure of the population: cohort oscillation and ageing.

Although it has been said to have serious adverse repercussions, the phenomenon of cohort oscillation has been given little attention in the region. It is due to fluctuations (over periods of one, five or ten years) in the number of births, which result in changes in the size of specific age groups as the members of the cohorts in question advance in their life cycle. For communities, these fluctuations result in changes, sometimes abrupt, in the social demands typical of those groups, since they are reflected in pressures (sometimes very great) during the phases of expansion of the cohort and slackening of such pressures during the contraction phase, thus possibly leading to the under-utilization of resources and infrastructure. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the rapid decline in fertility causes great fluctuations in the size of the cohorts; when this decline follows an irregular pattern, the phenomenon becomes even more serious, as occurs in various countries (such as Argentina, Chile and Cuba) where the number of births falls in one five-year period, only to recover in the next period and fall again later on.

The ups and downs in supply and demand for social services are not the only adverse repercussion of these fluctuations in the cohorts. Because of their statistical effect, they are also accompanied by the coetaneity of types of conduct characteristic of persons of a given age, so that if such types of conduct involve conflictive relations, the aggregate effect will be harmful; this appears to be the case with some forms of aggressive and criminal behaviour, which are much more prevalent among young people.

The risks associated with cohort oscillation are unavoidable and affect —subject to specific features inherent in the evolution of mortality and fertility— all communities which are in the process of demographic transition; as might be expected, however, the response capacity and adaptability of communities will depend both on their technical talent for anticipating such fluctuations and the resources available, the design of forms of action which are sensitive to the fluctuations, and the institutional and budgetary flexibility of the countries for reallocating resources. In the case of individuals, the capacity to respond to a limited supply of education or jobs will be very closely linked with the support given to them by their families and the human and social capital they have been able to accumulate.

The second socio-demographic risk generated by the demographic transition is the ageing process, whose potentially adverse consequences make themselves felt in the economic variables (such as aggregate demand, saving and competitiveness), the public finances (especially in the areas of health and social security), the epidemiological profile (which becomes more complex) and the social structure (which may become less flexible). Some of these consequences are evident, but others are more hypothetical and hard to evaluate, since population ageing is a new situation in history (Guzmán, 2001; Kincella and Vecoff, 2001; ECLAC, 2000h; Wise, 1999; Hill, Morelos and Wong, 1999; IBRD, 1994).

This process is fully under way in Latin America and the Caribbean and is reflected in the rapid increase in the proportion and size of the population aged 60 or 65 or more. The regional picture with regard to ageing, however, reflects the heterogeneous nature of the demographic transition: the countries which are most advanced in this process —including some small Caribbean island States such as Barbados— have the highest degrees of ageing, whereas the countries which have made least progress in this transition have historically low indices of ageing.

Although ageing of the population is a virtually unavoidable risk, in theory it can be forestalled through deliberate management of the demographic factors which determine it (fertility and migration). The fact that there are no successful examples of such management, however, means that tackling the

adverse effects associated with this phenomenon will depend on the response capacity and adaptability of national communities. In this respect, the region has a mixed outlook ahead of it: although the countries with the most aged populations have higher levels of economic and social development and more solid institutions for dealing with the needs of the elderly, those levels are far below those of the industrialized countries and have weaker bases, thus limiting the possibility of repeating the institutional experiences and policies of the developed nations. In this respect, the situation of Latin America and the Caribbean gives grounds for concern, since there is no background experience on population ageing in a context of precarious economic and social development.

The relation between ageing and levels of economic and social development is even less clear in the subnational communities, whose percentages of old persons are highly influenced by the selectivity of migration. In some countries of the region (Bolivia and Brazil, for example), the relative size of the population over 65 is clearly larger in rural areas (ECLAC, 2001a), although the urban communities are much more advanced in the demographic transition and have greater institutional resources for attending to the needs of the elderly, as well as organizations fostering active adaptation to the emerging age structure.

Ageing is a risk that takes on specific features according to the households and individuals involved. In domestic units, the effect of the basic determining factors (fertility and mortality) combines with that of living together as a family; in individuals, in contrast, the only relevant variable is mortality. In both cases, the adverse effects caused by ageing are connected with the loss of resources (such as work, family networks and social contacts) and physical and mental deterioration in later stages of life. The evidence suggests that the ageing of households and individuals is becoming generalized in the region; the proportion of households inhabited only by old persons is increasing and is clearly higher in the countries which have advanced furthest in the demographic transition. Although in those countries there is an unusually large proportion of single-person households inhabited by old people, most old people still form part of broader domestic arrangements, thus showing the ongoing role of the family—despite all the difficulties involved—in the social insertion and care of old people. Moreover, as life expectancy after the age of 60 has increased considerably in all the countries of the region, individual ageing is reflected not only in longer life but also in an increasing number of old persons.

The increase in life expectancy has some paradoxical aspects. It is a clear sign of hope for the human race, both because of its intrinsic significance (the postponement of death) and because it reflects the at least partial surmounting of powerful economic and social barriers: proof of this is the fact that some countries of the region now have mortality levels close to those of Europe and the increase in life expectancy is beginning to spread to all economic and social segments. The broadening of the population base reaching old age does not mean, however, that the increase in length of life is accompanied by an improvement in its quality, since a growing proportion of households and individuals are growing old in precarious economic conditions. In other words, there is a gradual increase in the proportion of old households and individuals in economic and social groups which do not have sufficient resources to make them economically secure; the difficulties they encountered in their adult life may rapidly get worse in old age, since they have accumulated few assets for coping with this situation. There is also a clear gender disparity behind this overall tendency, since the lack of equity affecting women, which restricts their capacity to save, is compounded in old age and is combined with the effects of the affective losses associated with widowhood. Finally, the generalized spread of the ageing of households and individuals is taking place in contexts in which the two institutions responsible for looking after old people (the State and the family) are both suffering various kinds of problems.

## 11. Persistent and emerging risks to life

Mortality, which is the socio-demographic risk *par excellence*, is undoubtedly being reduced with the advance of the demographic transition. In concrete terms, this means avoiding preventable deaths and putting off the end of life for as long as the human body and medical knowledge permit. In this respect, the demographic transition has a close and interactive relation with the epidemiological transition; this latter reconfigures the morbidity/mortality profile in such a way as to gradually arrive at a hard core of causes of death of a chronic and degenerative nature which are difficult to prevent because their reduction requires changes in lifestyles, huge volumes of resources, and big advances in medical knowledge and technology. The progress being made in the epidemiological transition does not mean that the risks of preventable death disappear, however, as shown by the situation of the countries of the region which are poorest and least advanced in the demographic transition, in which such risks continue to predominate; the countries which have advanced furthest in the transition display a mixed situation, since along with the emergence and establishment of endogenous diseases there is also an inflow of new contagious pathologies and external causes which are linked with lifestyles and therefore, in principle, preventable.

In view of the profound economic and social inequality characterizing the region, even in the countries with high life expectancy and low fertility, advances in terms of the control of mortality are more limited among poor communities, especially those suffering from various forms of exclusion, such as indigenous populations. These communities are most seriously exposed to the reappearance of diseases which were believed to have been brought under control, and the weakness of their response capacity means that they are almost exclusively dependent on outside help, which is often tardy and insufficient.

The appearance and rapid spread of HIV/AIDS —to such a point that it has become a priority public health problem in most countries of the region, especially those where it is highly prevalent, such as Haiti and the Bahamas— shows how complex contagious pathologies become when they affect in particular certain age groups and economic and social segments. The vulnerability involved here is reflected not only in the rapid diversification of the population groups at risk —first homosexuals, then prostitutes, then hypodermic syringe users (including recipients of blood transfusions), and finally heterosexuals and babies infected by their mothers during pregnancy or breast feeding— but also in the dramatic economic and social disparities that determine the possibilities of prevention and the response capacity and adaptability to the disease. Among the poor —who suffer from discrimination in the absence of a suitable framework of institutional and legal support— HIV/AIDS is a killer disease. Among individuals of high economic and social level, in contrast, their access to a battery of suitable medicines allows them to control the advance of the disease.

Finally, the mortality and different degrees of disability caused by accidents and violence do not yield to the advance of the demographic transition because they do not depend on it. Many of these incidents could be prevented by changes in conduct, which only take effect in the long term because they depend on cultural factors which have a complex relation with the degree of modernity of communities and the economic and social situation of households and individuals. In any case, people in a poverty situation who lack resources, insurance and other means of prior protection are not in a position to cover the cost of the attention required when such risks materialize, and moreover such persons are often looked down upon by the legal system and the police.

## 12. Location and mobility of the population in an increasingly urban region

The risks associated with the initial and intermediate stages in the transition to urban areas and greater mobility may be summed up in the “urban apocalypse” image. In this respect, the intense rural-urban migration which has been taking place —due to the economic and social inequalities between the two types of areas— involves a whole range of potentially adverse situations both for the urban communities, whose rapid growth is hard to absorb, and for the migrants themselves (who see migration as a survival strategy or as a means of improving their living conditions), since many of them suffer situations of exclusion, uncertainty and fragile rights, because of their socio-cultural backwardness compared with the city slickers and also their condition of outsiders without links, contacts or a knowledge of how to do things in the urban environment. The image of the “rural desert”, which is the reverse of the “urban apocalypse”, would appear to indicate that depopulation of rural areas is another risk typical of the initial and intermediate stages in the urban transition, but the simultaneous effect of this transition and the demographic transition actually gives rise to a situation in which the rural population keeps on expanding because its natural growth rate is higher than that of urban areas. In more advanced stages of the urban transition the scenario of risks and problems of the communities becomes “urbanized”, and so do the phenomena of crime, informality, pollution and congestion. Unlike what happens in the case of the demographic transition, however —whose advance clearly generates risks (such as ageing)— the socio-demographic risks in the more advanced stages of the urban transition are essentially of a contingent nature, since their existence is not an inevitable result of that transition. Leaving aside the images and the phase in the urban transition involved, the form of location of the population undoubtedly involves two extremely important risks: the dispersion of the rural population over a host of small localities, and settlement in areas which are of precarious legality or are exposed to natural disasters.

Among the risks which are inherent in urban contexts are those connected with the formation of systems of dominant or very large cities (including megalopolises): a process which involves potentially serious adverse effects such as diseconomies of agglomeration, obstacles to good government and administration, and failure to exploit other productive options. Furthermore, in highly urbanized environments there is an upsurge of socio-demographic risks connected with the location and mobility of persons within cities and other phenomena with adverse consequences emerge, such as the depopulation of inner-city areas, the occupation of peripheral land exposed to environmental dangers, and residential segregation.

The synchrony of the urban and demographic transitions in Latin America and the Caribbean is not surprising, because urbanization is one of the bases (and a catalyst) for the sustained reduction of mortality and fertility. As these transitions advance, the threat of “urban apocalypse” is gradually left behind, as witness the fact that between the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements or HABITAT I (Vancouver, 1976) and HABITAT II (Istanbul, 1996) the governments of the region progressed from a vision of the future of urban areas as total chaos to another more optimistic one. This does not mean that Latin American and Caribbean cities have successfully overcome the adverse situations typical of the early phases of the urban transition: on the contrary, many were overwhelmed by problems and their rapid expansion led to a significant —and sometimes dramatic— increase in “urban problems”. The urban transition pressed on, however, and the forecasts of catastrophe were not fulfilled, since some economic and social signals reduced (perhaps only temporarily) the attractiveness of some of the biggest urban centres (such as Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) and at the same time enhanced the attractiveness of medium-sized cities. On the other hand, the improved position of agricultural export activities —thanks to the external openness of the economies and international competitiveness based on the exploitation of natural advantages— did not affect the long-standing trend towards settlement of the population in urban areas. Indeed, new dynamic centres grew up in the urban economy, especially in the services sector, and both the public and private sectors took steps to satisfy, at least in part, the needs of the urban population and urban production activities. The assimilation of

migrants was also favoured by the consolidation of support networks and the narrowing of the educational gaps between rural and urban areas. Lastly, adaptation mechanisms arose for absorbing the population growth in urban areas, even though some of these mechanisms were perverse (such as informality or the invasion of land).

The fact that the evolution of the urban and demographic transitions coincided with a process of economic and social development in the region helped to soften the impact of the risks associated with the initial and intermediate stages of the urban transition: just when the expansion of the cities due to migration had reached levels difficult to sustain, some signs of slackening in the demands due to natural population growth began to be observed, and response capacity and adaptability grew stronger. Even so, the countries which are currently in the initial and intermediate stages of the urban transition have a complicated prospect ahead of them, since they are simultaneously registering high levels of population growth in urban and rural areas but low levels of economic and social development.<sup>5</sup> Although in the countries at an advanced stage of the urban transition the predominant risks are basically those typical of cities, rural areas are a source of concern because they continue to lag behind in economic and social terms and also display serious problems of dispersion and isolation.

In the highly urbanized countries, which, because of their size, influence the situation of the region as a whole, the most outstanding risks are those associated with the location of the population. One of them is due to the contrast between the departure of population from inner-city areas and the expansion on the periphery observed in many large cities. Although there is an extensive debate about the advantages and disadvantages of horizontal expansion, it is generally acknowledged that the abandonment of inner-city areas is a waste, because they are generally well-equipped and have good communications, while expansion towards the periphery usually means, in the case of the poor, the occupation of areas which are exposed to natural disasters, are poorly equipped, and have serious problems of communications. Although such expansion represents an attempt to meet the demands for space and housing, the adverse effects it involves for the poor are very difficult to counter: natural disasters cause the loss of assets (and sometimes even of lives), the poor communications mean that much time is wasted on travel, and the lack of proper equipment and infrastructure adversely affects their performance and the use they make of their free time.

The second risk is residential segregation. This occurs when socio-economic or ethnic groups settle in separate “sectors” of the same city and have little or no contact with each other. Subject to the particular features of each case, residential segregation has existed for a long time in the region, but in the past its intensity seems to have been less marked than the racial segregation observed, for example, in cities in the United States. Among the adverse effects of segregation is its role as an agent reproducing the acute economic and social inequalities present in the countries of the region, which are clearly reflected in the territorial segmentation of the supply of education, which reduces the areas of socialization and institutional interaction of the different economic and social groups. These effects which reproduce inequality are further accentuated by the decentralization of public services, which assigns new responsibilities to the local levels of government, but often without establishing effective corrective mechanisms to make up for the inequalities in human and material resources. Segregation also redounds in negative externalities for those living in poor neighbourhoods, who are often looked down upon for this reason alone and receive lower remuneration than persons who are of similar status but live in sectors which are not poor or mixed. Finally, according to recent studies intra-metropolitan mobility—which in some countries is the most frequent type of territorial mobility—tends to heighten residential segregation (Rodríguez, 2001; Lattes, Rodríguez and Villa, 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> A typical case is that of Guatemala: its population growth rate over the five-year period from 2000 to 2005 is estimated at 2.6% per year: 2.9% in urban areas and 2.4% in rural areas (ECLAC, 1999).

### 13. Migration and the new international scenarios

The relation between the current globalization process and international migration is complex and, at the present stage, paradoxical. Globalization creates technical conditions which facilitate international movements, since the world is increasingly interconnected, as never before, by cheap and rapid means of transport, while from the socio-cultural point of view, the growing symbolic visibility offered by the global communications and information networks is a further stimulus for the mobility of persons. At the economic level, the persistent breach between the levels of economic and social development of countries is a powerful element behind decisions to migrate. All these factors join together to encourage international migration and promote its reorientation; unlike the great migrations of earlier centuries, which were directed towards areas that were still under-populated—a feature which furthered the economic convergence between some areas of the world and legitimized the mobility of labour—the present movements are directed towards the developed countries, to which migrants from the developing countries flock in search of better incomes, greater opportunities and better living conditions. The global order which is being built is not favourable to international migration, however: it dismantles the barriers against the flow of goods, services and capital, but erects new ones to contain the mobility of persons (ECLAC, 2002). Restrictive legislation, highly selective policies, institutional discrimination against immigrants (such as the “priority rules”), rigorous controls over entry and residence, and xenophobic attitudes among influential persons and circles in the countries of destination are examples of the aversion to migration from the developing countries.

Latin America and the Caribbean are no exception to the situation described: they no longer receive heavy flows of migrants from other regions but, on the contrary, register growing flows of emigrants to the developed countries. The long-standing flows of Mexicans emigrating to the United States are now accompanied by flows of Central Americans, Caribbean nationals and South Americans, but the expansion of the range of countries of origin is matched by a similar expansion of the range of destinations, since there are growing flows of emigrants to other parts of the developed world, especially Western Europe, Australia and Japan. Although international migration opens up a broad range of opportunities for communities, households and individuals, many of the potential benefits are diluted because of the difficulties in “governing” their own migration. The countries of the region lack suitable instruments for preventing the selective migration of technicians and professionals encouraged by the countries of destination; although the number of skilled personnel involved is only small, their loss can cause irreparable damage if the emigrants are the only specialists the source countries have in specific areas of production or scientific research. In contrast, less qualified individuals face severe restrictions on entering or residing in the developed countries; as well as having the perverse effect of widening skill-related disparities in income, these restrictions are responsible for the risks associated with undocumented migration and, still worse, the serious crime of trafficking in persons.

The disparities between the levels of education and skills of Latin American and Caribbean migrants and native-born citizens of the developed countries are used as an argument to denigrate the former (including even highly-skilled migrants), thus extending the prejudice that migrants are people with some kind of deficiencies, always on the borderline of the law, and willing to work at anything. This perception not only incites xenophobia and denigration but also makes migrants the scapegoats for domestic conflicts in the countries of destination and depicts them as a threat (more apparent than real) to the jobs and wages of native-born workers. In short, a very substantial proportion of migrants have to face growing adversities in their efforts to integrate into the recipient society, ranging from an increasingly hostile welcome and excessively strict supervision to various forms of discrimination, lack of protection and isolation, with serious possibilities of suffering violations of their basic rights. When, in addition, differences of culture and language are taken into account, this gives rise to a situation in which migrants, although they are exercising a right and are normally acting in accordance with a perfectly understandable rationale, are serious candidates for exclusion and frustration of their expectations, unless

they enjoy the support of humanitarian networks or bodies. Finally, the asymmetries between the countries of origin and those of destination also mean that the opportunities offered by international migration can be unilaterally reversed, with serious consequences for the national and domestic economies; some decisions —often not consulted with the countries of origin, such as the closure of frontiers or deportation— can not only trample on the rights of persons but may also undermine a crucial source of foreign exchange and income, such as remittances. It should be noted that if legal migration is a source of vulnerability, this is far more so in the case of undocumented migration, since this affects persons who usually do not have the assets to face basic challenges such as adaptation to the legal requirements of the country of destination. The defencelessness and insecurity of these migrants makes them easy prey for extortion, ill-treatment or other forms of abuse.

#### **14. The second demographic transition: the risks of lagging behind and of advancing**

The second demographic transition differs from the other two long-run processes dealt with here because so far it has been limited to the developed countries, and there are only partial indications of its possible extension to the rest of the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean; furthermore, it does not seem to have a well-defined core, since its various components —some of which are outside the traditional ambits of demographic science— can develop quite autonomously. Although it is difficult to determine the exact circumstances prevailing at the point in time when this second transition begins, it has been suggested that over a period of time, under a common logic of reflexive decisions centered around the individual, various vital fields —connected with the formation and dissolution of unions and with procreation— undergo significant changes that spread through the population (van de Kaa, 2001; Lesthaeghe, 1998). Although this is not yet sufficiently delineated, everything seems to suggest that this transition generates socio-demographic risks, some associated with a lag in the transition and other with its advance.

In the case of reproductive behaviour, the reflexive and functional integration of the relevant forms of conduct in personal projects leads to a decision to postpone unions and parenthood until the achievement of a certain minimum amount of education and a critical mass of experience and links that will allow a satisfactory economic and social position to be obtained. Thus, young men and women in the developed nations get married and have their first child at significantly later ages than their opposite numbers in Latin America and the Caribbean, thus enabling them to avoid the risk of leaving their formative period unfinished. Although this contrast shows that young people in the region are generally speaking still a long way from fulfilling the conditions of the second transition, comparison between economic and social strata reveals clear differences in this respect, since young people in the lower strata get married and have their first child at considerably lower ages than in the upper strata. In other words, the poor of the region run a much greater risk of suffering an interruption of their formative process —which currently demands a period of undivided attention extending well past adolescence— because their lack of assets for covering the costs of an early union and reproduction obliges them to enter the labour market quickly —usually with few qualifications— and means that they suffer many everyday urgent needs.

Although there is no clear evidence that the second transition is already taking shape in the region, the gap between the reproductive behaviour of young people from different strata is a matter for concern. It is not fair to blame young people —especially when they are poor— for their shortcomings in terms of human capital, for there are clear indications that their socio-demographic pattern of behaviour is due largely to the lack of options and horizons. In any case, for many young people the postponement of marriage and reproduction would be little use if their educational and employment opportunities are not expanded.

The second demographic transition also includes an increase in common-law unions, unmarried motherhood and divorce. A broad range of studies suggest that these phenomena entail adverse effects for all concerned (Amato, 2000; Cherlin, 1999). Common-law unions enjoy a lower level of social and institutional recognition than legal unions and are usually more fragile, which hinders their performance, especially as regards the upbringing of children, while divorce is a traumatic event whose most adverse effects are suffered by the wife and children, who are often abandoned once the matrimonial link is broken. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are not unaffected by the risks connected with changes in the family and matrimony, but for reasons which are very different from those associated with the second demographic transition in the developed countries.

While a number of governments are concerned over the greater frequency of divorce and separation (ECLAC, 2001c), informal unions and instability of the family are long-standing phenomena in the region. Unlike the situation with regard to the second transition in Europe, these forms of behaviour with respect to nuptiality are due to circumstances —such as economic and social problems or gender biases against women— that have nothing to do with socio-cultural modernity. Common-law marriage is a frequent domestic arrangement in a number of Latin American and Caribbean countries, especially among the poorer groups, who have various types of difficulties (economic, cultural and administrative) in entering into formal marriage; something similar can be said of separation —likewise a frequent practice among the poorer strata— which is responsible for a large part of the many single-parent households. In other words, informal unions and broken families in the region reflect socio-economic and gender-based biases that heighten the exposure of the households and individuals with the least capacity to respond to adversity, as shown by the very long-standing lack of legal protection for abandoned women and children.

Although the scanty evidence available does not allow a reliable distinction to be made between past and present marital informality and family instability in the region, there are indications that these phenomena are becoming more frequent among the middle and upper strata: a form of behaviour which was previously quite rare and socially censured. If this trend is indeed true, this would mean that a situation is growing up in which similar events exist (marital informality and fragile unions), but are linked with very different social situations and consequences, since in the case of the poor they are due to the effects of destitution, whereas in the case of the middle and upper strata they appear to be due to conflicts between personal projects for the future. Whatever the real situation, and even if it were the result of modern forces, family instability has adverse effects on all concerned, so actions should be designed to reduce its incidence and to increase the capacity for response when it does occur; communities should also make an effort of adaptation by reviewing the existing institutions in order to avoid the continued application of biases of the past to situations which have now undergone drastic changes. It goes without saying that the assumption that these risks will disappear if they are denied institutional recognition should be rejected out of hand: this attitude, which is similar to the policy of burying one's head in the sand, is just as senseless as that of proposing the prohibition, in order to prevent their possible adverse effects, of international migration or the birth of an extra child above a certain maximum. With regard to divorce, however, in spite of its adverse effects, in many cases it is the only reasonable option for a couple who cannot continue to live together. Furthermore, the increase in separations and divorces which has accompanied the second demographic transition is a possibly transitory result of the predominance of individual projects over those of the family or group and the greater equality of relations between men and women on the domestic level: phenomena which are growing stronger in the context of current modernity and whose omission from institutional recognition will lead nowhere.

## 15. Lines of action for tackling socio-demographic vulnerability

### a) General lines

How can communities, households and individuals tackle socio-demographic vulnerability? First of all, it is necessary to become aware that this vulnerability exists, that the demographic tendencies under way are not eliminating it but merely changing it, and that it is important because it limits the exercise of rights and the development of community, household and individual projects. Second, it must be understood that the long time horizon of demographic processes makes it possible to predict major changes to some extent (thus making it possible to anticipate future situations) and opens up the possibility of taking early action to prevent adverse effects from materializing; decision-makers must be made aware of the advantages of taking proper advantage of the long-term nature of these phenomena, because as the dynamics of some demographic risks have a strong inertial component, if early action is not taken it will be necessary to make much greater efforts later on. Third, it must be borne in mind that a number of the measures designed to reduce socio-demographic vulnerability can result in gains for all the actors involved (win-win policies), although part of their benefits may be contingent upon the effects of other policies. Fourth, it is essential to recognize that the field of intervention can cover three fronts (see figure): **prevention**, which means trying to avoid materialization of the risk; **strengthening of response capacity**, which means the capacity to react once the adverse effects of the risk have manifested themselves, and **enhancement of adaptability**, which means making endogenous changes in order to adjust actively to the situation resulting from materialization of the risk.

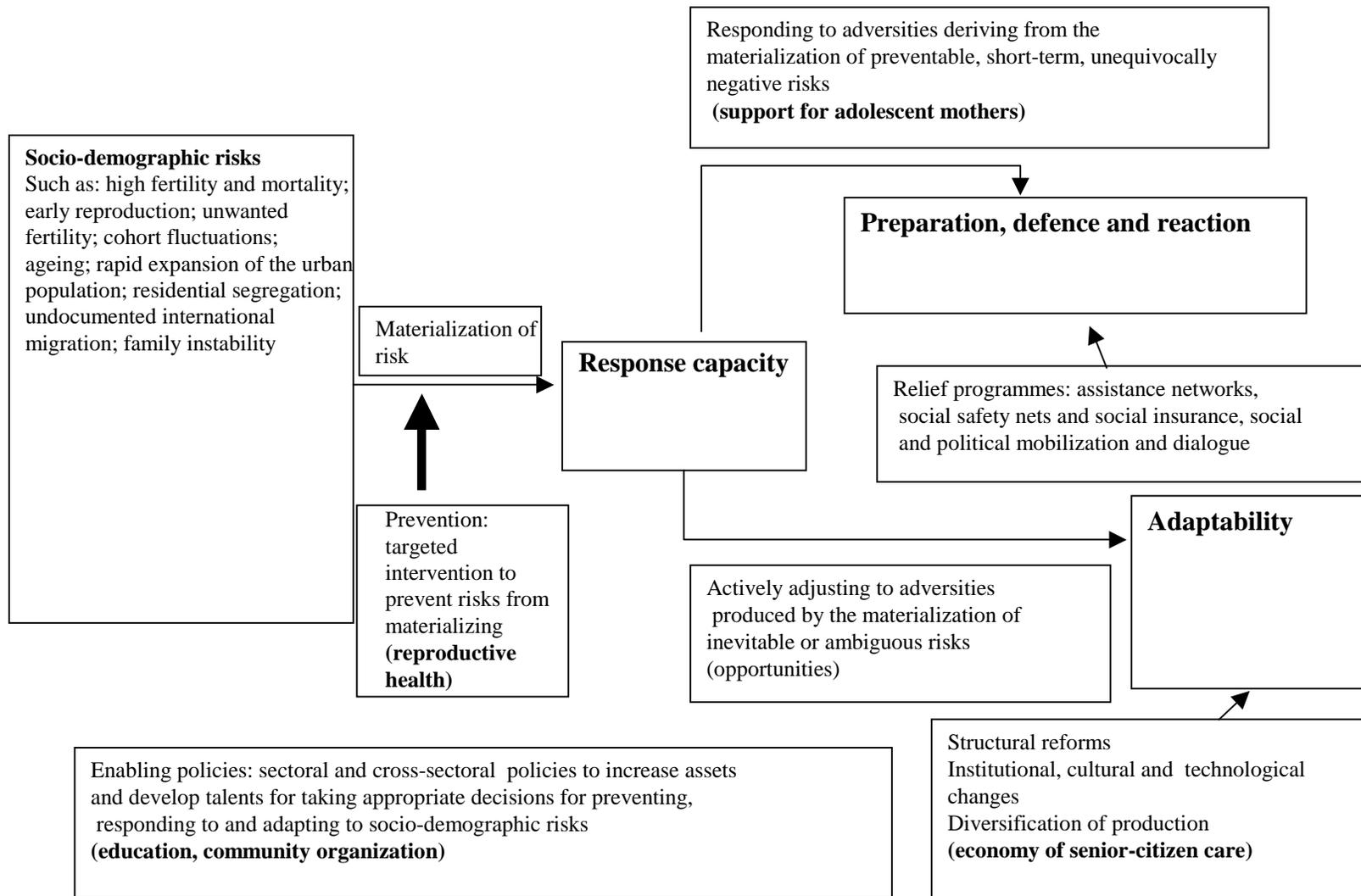
In order to prevent the socio-demographic risks referred to in the previous sections of this document, there is a wide range of possible policies and actions whose choice will depend, among other things, on the type of risk it is desired to prevent. The response capacity of the actors to the adverse consequences resulting from the materialization of such risks can be strengthened through anticipatory policies, corrective actions and defence strategies, which may or may not be publicly promoted. Enhancing adaptability presupposes prior evaluation of the nature of the risk, since if the risk is avoidable adaptation to its effects would be in principle counter-productive; if adaptation is in order, however, action should be taken to promote policies, incentives, regulatory frameworks, action to heighten awareness, institutional and legal reforms, etc., designed to remodel community, household or individual patterns of conduct in order to make them compatible with the risks that cannot be avoided, since successful adaptation involves surmounting the previous state (i.e., taking a step forward in a process which can be interpreted in line with the evolutionist metaphor).

### b) Prevention of socio-demographic risks

As in other social areas, prevention of the risks of socio-demographic vulnerability has at least two great merits. The first is that this generates a more secure and favourable environment for the development of the actors, who are thus faced with a less threatening world. The second is that it usually has lower social and economic costs than those of actions designed to repair or make good adverse effects; preventive action, which makes it unnecessary to spend resources later in order to respond to the materialization of adverse effects or to adapt to them, brings great savings in later phases of the process.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, preventive policies have shown their effectiveness in reducing various socio-demographic risks, especially those connected with lags in the demographic transition. This success is due to a combination of factors: (i) active and concrete political will, reflected in budgetary allocations, well-defined sectoral interventions, and the training of skilled human resources;

**Diagram**  
**SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VULNERABILITY: BASIC ANALYTICAL OUTLINE AND POLICY OPTIONS**



(ii) clear objectives, pursued with a statesmanlike approach which does not falter when opposed by interest groups and sends out clear messages to communities, households and individuals about the consequences of individual decisions and forms of conduct; (iii) institutional changes to further the recognition of rights, the strengthening of intersectoral action and following-up of the goals established; and (iv) active participation by organizations of civil society and international agencies in the establishment of networks for heightening awareness, promotion and assistance which complement—and sometimes go beyond—the efforts of the public networks. In addition, many preventive policies are based on a combination of means, including: universal multisectoral action designed to ensure the fulfillment of social rights and the availability of basic services; mass information, education and communication actions; the supply of specialized services (as for example in the areas of primary health care and human reproduction), and programmes focused on the segments most likely to be exposed to risks, especially the poor and ethnic groups.

Another factor in the success achieved by preventive policies in the region is the changes which aided them and made them viable. These changes comprised both those registered in the economic and social and cultural spheres—including legal and institutional changes—which weakened the material and subjective bases of the risks, and those of a technological nature (including those relating to health and the control of reproduction). At all events, the success achieved in avoiding risks was noteworthy not only for the rapidity of its effects but also because during the execution of the policies in question the countries had to surmount economic crises, changes of government and social upheavals. Equally important is the fact that in some countries this risk prevention was achieved in contexts of persistent economic and social inequalities and weaknesses, although this also reveals the “partial” nature of the actions taken to avoid socio-demographic risks, because it did not prove possible to prevent the persistence of other social risks.

There are socio-demographic risks against which preventive action should be the prime policy option, because of its appropriateness and feasibility. There are many examples in the region—some of them quite successful—of programmes designed to bring down morbidity and mortality due to outside causes (violence, various types of addiction, accidents, etc.), which affects young people above all. Something similar has occurred in the case of efforts to reduce the risks of contracting transmissible diseases, especially VD and HIV/AIDS, likewise among young people. Actions which are less well known, but nevertheless exist, are the programmes and interventions aimed at preventing violation of the human rights of migrants. The extension of sexual and reproductive health services, for its part, has proved to be effective in preventing unwanted fertility, though its limited coverage in the initial stages of reproductive life and its insufficiency for achieving effective empowerment of couples with regard to control over their reproduction indicate that substantial gaps still exist.

Adolescent fertility can and must be forestalled, but this calls for programmes which take account of the special features of persons in this age group and of the countries themselves. The experience of the region indicates that expansion of the educational and employment-related opportunities and prospects of young people directly helps to avoid early unions and reproduction, thus weakening the bases of traditional adolescent fertility. As the effects of such expansion of opportunities are only seen in the long term, however, they must be complemented with direct actions taking into account the cultural and material bases of such fertility; the first and most difficult task in a context of traditional adolescent fertility is to induce the couples themselves to take the decision to control their reproduction. On the one hand, the distorted form of sexual and reproductive modernity prevailing in Latin America and the Caribbean means that growing sexual liberality is combined with lack of access to the means of controlling reproduction; in this case, prevention must be based on actions in various areas (the community, peer groups, the family) and must use various channels (the schools, the media, leaders of opinion) to promote responsible forms of reproductive and affective behaviour. It is also essential to design programmes specially aimed at adolescents which act on the immediate determinants of their

fertility (Freedman, Davis and Blake, 1967) and take as the target population adolescents as a whole, as individuals who are potentially active in terms of sex; some of these activities should be specifically focused on male and female adolescents who have already had their sexual initiation or are likely to have it soon. These programmes can be aimed at two objectives: increasing both the information available and the level of knowledge on means of contraception, as well as the access to them; and postponing the initiation of sexual relations. Although these two goals can be pursued simultaneously, practical experience shows that they often come into conflict and decision-makers tend to act on political or ideological grounds; it is very important to solve this conflict, since it is generally agreed that the indispensable actions to forestall adolescent fertility must not have the effect of encouraging earlier sexual initiation.

Although all adolescents should have access to the means of preventing unwanted pregnancies, such access is not of itself sufficient to ensure effective control of fertility; this is due both to technical reasons (since having these means at hand is not necessarily equivalent to using them properly (Guzmán and others, 2001; ECLAC/CELADE, 2000f and 1998), and to psycho-social reasons (emotional instability and difficulties in carrying on reflexive negotiations at that age), which form part of the characteristics of this population group. It is therefore essential to develop responsible parenthood programmes which are in line with the psycho-social dynamics of adolescents, not with adult standards. At the same time, in so far as they further the affective dimension and the idea of shared responsibility, these programmes can increase the response capacity to adolescent pregnancy, as they will include elements that support the stability of the couple.

Leaving aside the socio-demographic risks that are outside the sphere of prevention —such as cohort fluctuations— the remainder are all more or less preventable. In some cases, however, elimination of the risk is unlikely or even inadvisable. Ageing is a good example of the first type of risk, since theoretically there is not doubt that a community can avoid this if it achieves a suitable mix of fertility and migration (taking action with respect to mortality in order to prevent ageing is out of the question). Action aimed at increasing fertility, however, apart from having a history of failures, would go against the prevailing tendencies in the region, which still seek to promote lower fertility; hence, the only remaining possibility is to use age-selective migration (replacement migration), but not even the countries best placed to adopt such an option consider it to be useful or desirable for avoiding long-term ageing (United Nations, 2001). Seen from the point of view of individual longevity, ageing now involves an important distinction in policy terms: preventive measures are not designed to eliminate the risk in itself, but rather to reduce or postpone some of its adverse effects. Actions designed to promote healthy lifestyles, routine health checks or improved self-esteem will not stop people from ageing, but they will put off the psycho-physiological deterioration that becomes more marked with age.

In the case of risks such as international migration, common-law unions and divorce, short- and long-term preventive action is in order, but as it will not be sufficient alone, its application will call for some precautions. Short-term action of a dissuasive nature, directly related with the risks, operates through administrative requirements, specifically targeted penalties, various types of incentives, and information and counselling services, but it often includes biased aspects (as for example against immigrants or cohabiting couples) which are not only controversial but may conflict with increasingly universally recognized rights. Long-term policies, for their part, are not always explicit, as they may be aimed at objectives outside the socio-demographic ambit, but such policies (for example, those based on stimulating economic development in order to inhibit the migration of highly qualified personnel) have not been very successful, while explicit policies whose aim is to maintain a given state of affairs (for example, to promote a culture of family stability from the earliest school levels) run up against economic and socio-cultural forces that promote the opposite.

### c) **Strengthening response capacity to socio-demographic risks**

As already noted, the ambiguous situation existing between adversity and opportuneness makes it inappropriate or inadvisable to try to prevent some socio-demographic risks, while in the case of some others a strategy of this type is virtually impracticable, but in addition to these risks there are others whose prevention does not guarantee their disappearance, but only their reduction. One example is that of adolescent fertility, since even if it proved possible to bring it down to levels as low as those of Japan, it would still be necessary to design support mechanisms for the few adolescent mothers who would still exist. There are also risks, such as residential segregation, whose cost of prevention may be greater than that of dealing with their adverse effects. In these cases, the best policy option is to strengthen the response capacity of communities, households and individuals, which may be achieved in various ways, many of them capable of being achieved through action by the public and/or private sectors, non-governmental organizations, and the social actors themselves.

One way of strengthening response capacity is to increase the ability of the actors to anticipate the occurrence of risks and take early action to reduce their adverse effects, thus preventing them from getting worse and spreading. Unlike many social risks, where early warning is accompanied by the need for urgent action, socio-demographic risks usually develop over considerable periods of time, so that the measures for dealing with them are not always so urgent, although their postponement may make them less effective or even useless in the medium term. In the case of communities, improving their anticipatory skills requires the training of human resources, the promotion of research and the systematic accumulation of specialized knowledge in the socio-demographic field, as well as institutional arrangements to spread that knowledge and promote its proper use within the area of action of the public authorities and other agents responsible for policy design, planning of resources, and strategic planning. In the case of households and individuals, it is essential that this knowledge should be converted into easily understandable information.

The response capacity of the actors can also be strengthened by preparing them to withstand and handle the adversities caused by the materialization of risks, which involves increasing their asset endowment and heightening their skills to design strategies and put them into practice. Social policies play a key role in this process of preparation, since they can provide suitable assets for reducing or neutralizing a variety of adversities connected with socio-demographic risks: suitable education already provided in rural areas will reduce the likelihood that migrants will suffer discrimination in the cities; a growing income flow will make it easier to cope with the costs of raising a large family; availability of jobs for women will strengthen their capacity to face up to the breakdown of their marriage or to provide for them in old age. Other specific actions can also help such preparation: psycho-social support for adolescent mothers will help them to attain the maturity needed for bringing up their children; preparation of potential international migrants by providing them with the necessary information and promoting contacts with networks that support their integration will protect them from ill-treatment, discrimination or xenophobia in the societies of destination.

A third way to strengthen the response capacity of the actors is to give them social protection once the risk has materialized; this can be done through relief mechanisms which operate on an *ex post* basis only for the affected communities, households and individuals, as in the case of safety nets (EC-ESA, 2001; Hicks and Wodon, 2001; IDB, 2000; Sojo, 1999) which operate in this way to deal with social risks. In the area of socio-demographic vulnerability, a good example is that of the programmes developed in Chile, Costa Rica and Jamaica to support adolescent mothers in a highly precarious economic situation through special services (education, health and even employment) to prevent them from dropping out of school or to support them in raising their children. The best-known and most important form of social protection, however, operates on an *ex ante* basis through insurance. Social security is the backbone of any strategy designed to cope with current risks, and because of its long-term

projections it can sometimes also serve as an adaptation mechanism, but it generally operates in connection with avoidable risks and centers on the kind of adversities normally associated with reductions in income. The insurance provided by public institutions and specific markets plays a fundamental role with respect to some socio-demographic risks such as ageing, divorce or death (especially when those affected are the breadwinners of a household). Nevertheless —regardless of whether it is based on solidarity or on the individual handling of uncertainties— insurance has serious limitations, as most socio-demographic risks are not covered by social security, and there are no active markets for many of them.

Finally, strengthening the response capacity of the actors also includes increasing their participation, which means expanding their forms of organization and promoting their skills in terms of mobilization and social criticism. Consideration of socio-demographic risks cannot be left out of political or technical decisions on the establishment of rules, the distribution of public resources and the allocation of social priorities. A number of these risks, such as those associated with reproduction or migration, involve rights which cannot be properly exercised, and this justifies citizen participation and pressure as appropriate means of remedying that state of affairs. In other cases, the workings of society may act as a compensatory mechanism, either by redistributing the burden of adversity or giving rise to the intervention of community organizations in support of those affected; migrant aid networks are a good example of collective responses to risks which, in principle, affect individuals.

#### **d) Adaptation to emerging risks**

Ultimately, adaptation is a form of long-term response which —apart from short-term reactions— involves multidimensional endogenous changes in communities, households and individuals to adapt to the materialization of risks. It takes place when the risks are unavoidable, form part of the process of modernity, or offer opportunities which outweigh the potential adversities. When there is clear evidence of the inexorable nature of emerging socio-demographic risks, there can be no doubt of the appropriateness of processes of adaptation, but they are not a suitable way to address the risks typical of economic and socio-cultural backwardness, especially as their adoption may give rise to practices which are harmful in the long term.

In some cases, the need for adaptation does not give rise to any controversy, although the specific forms it can take may do so. Population ageing is a good example in this respect, since there is no doubt that communities, households and individuals must learn to live with the elderly in a “society for all ages” (ECLAC, 2000h and 1997). Adapting to population ageing calls for profound changes in social policies (for example, reorienting health programmes to cover an epidemiological scenario involving chronic, complex pathologies which are costly to treat), in the functioning of the labour market (in order to make room for the incorporation of older persons working part-time), in cultural codes (in order to recognize the contribution of the elderly) and in the rules of social coexistence in general.

In other cases, adaptation forms part of a virtuous cycle of uncertain duration. Thus, the achievement of high rates of economic growth and generation of employment makes it possible to support rapid population growth, but the unpredictability of economic fluctuations limits its long-term projections. Likewise, the formation of transnational spaces encourages and consolidates migrant exchanges, but its stability depends on the economic and socio-cultural symmetries and complementarities of the national communities involved.

Adaptation can also take place through mechanisms which offset the adversities that the risks entail, or even sometimes through promotion of the opportunities they may generate. Such is the case of residential segregation, which, because of the powerful forces behind it, may be tackled in the long-term

through compensatory mechanisms which promote the expansion of the spaces that exist for the interaction of different economic and social groups, the development of a good-quality and socially heterogeneous public school system, action to foster a culture that values social and cultural diversity, or the redistribution of resources among local governments.

In making a technical diagnosis of the nature of risks and their projections, it is hard to escape from political or ideological considerations. Thus, in addition to the preventive actions which it is considered necessary to put into effect, an evaluation of the risks associated with the second demographic transition could well conclude that its advance is inexorable or linked with long-run cultural changes, and recommend actions designed to further adaptation to it. One form of adaptation to the new scenario, for example, could envisage institutional changes to broaden official recognition of common-law marriages and avoid discrimination against the children of such unions, which would be equivalent to deciding that the main priority is not to eradicate the risk but to prevent the materialization of its consequences. The same could occur with legislative changes on divorce which seek to strengthen the position of wives and children in the event of separation.

## 16. Final comments

(i) Socio-demographic risks do not disappear, but instead undergo changes. The advance of the demographic transition reduces some risks, but it does not prevent others from persisting and other new risks from emerging. In other words, the adversities due to population growth do not come to an end with stabilization of the population.

(ii) Communities, households and individuals are all exposed to risks of a socio-demographic nature, which suggests that their analysis and the design of relevant policies should be undertaken using a universal approach. To put it another way: the demographic dynamics of poverty are not the only source of socio-demographic vulnerability.

(iii) In spite of their universality, however, the profiles of socio-demographic risks vary between population groups; the most under-privileged groups, such as the poor and indigenous groups, have little response capacity and little adaptability to these risks (indeed, in some cases adaptation can even have perverse effects). In short, some actions must be specifically focused on the most under-privileged segments of society.

(iv) Policies aimed at reducing socio-demographic vulnerability can seek to prevent risks, strengthen response capacity or improve adaptability; these options are not limited to the socio-demographic field, because public policies —especially social policies— act on these three levels. Ultimately, there are two main challenges: linking up inherently socio-demographic policies with the rest, and influencing the design of social policies in order to obtain synergies (in this case, strengthening their effects in terms of reducing socio-demographic vulnerability).

(v) The prevention of socio-demographic risks has proved to be a successful option and has great advantages over the other two lines of action, so that it should be given priority, but it is not always feasible or even desirable in every case, and its possible desirability should not blind us to the fact that even in the case of the risks which are easiest to avoid there are always some individuals who are affected by them and need help. Response capacity can be strengthened in various ways: by anticipating risks, by empowering the actors, by providing social protection, and by promoting self-organization, but it should nevertheless be borne in mind that actions of this type may be costly and may not always be completely effective, since sometimes they entail the danger of inadvertently promoting the risks it is desired to avoid, by preventing individuals from having to bear the consequences of their own decisions

or forms of conduct. For its part, adaptation can be achieved through different schemes, and while it is particularly appropriate for tackling risks which are unavoidable in the long term, in order to be of real value it must be active, which means accepting risks that are essentially unavoidable or involve opportunities that cannot be neglected. All in all, it is necessary to make a careful evaluation of all the strategic options, weighing their costs of all types and their appropriateness.

(vi) Finally, it is obvious that the region is facing a complex situation of socio-demographic vulnerability. As the risks vary between countries and also within them, policies must be tailored to these specific features. The advance of the demographic transition has reduced traditional risks, but it has not eliminated them altogether, since they still persist in some subnational communities, which in some countries are even in the majority. The emergence of new risks has not been accompanied by corresponding strengthening of response capacity or early adaptation processes; a matter of particular concern is that the region is undergoing population ageing in a context of precarious economic and social development. Thus, the repercussions of this combination of changes in the socio-demographic risk scenario, side by side with the persistence of economic and social and normative lags, are already evident now and will become even more so in the future.

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