

Preface

Despite its young age the Vienna Yearbook has established the tradition of publishing topical issues that correspond to the series of annual conferences organised by the Vienna Institute of Demography. The 2006 Yearbook featuring a focus on “Postponement of Childbearing in Europe” has already become a widely used reference on the topic. This present issue on the topic of “Can policies enhance fertility in Europe?” promises to become an equally sought-after compendium on a hot and policy-relevant question.

There are two very different and independent questions that need to be addressed scientifically in the context of fertility policies: 1.) Should governments directly address fertility levels as an object of policy making? and 2.) If the answer is yes, what effect would such policies have on the actual level of fertility? In the political discussion these two different questions are often mixed, resulting in statements such as “because policies make no difference to the level of fertility, governments should not try to have such policies”. But if taken seriously, these two questions require quite different kinds of scientific analysis. The question of the general desirability of pronatalist policies calls for a broad assessment of the expected longer-term consequences of low fertility ranging from issues of ageing, pensions and health to economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability. Traditionally, this question has also been loaded with ethical concerns and with ethnic/nationalist sentiments that value changes in the size of one (sub-)population differently from that of others. Hence, a comprehensive scientific assessment of this first question is very difficult, if not impossible.

For this reason the conference focused on the second question about the effectiveness of such policies, should governments see reasons to pursue them. This is a research question that can be addressed empirically and scientifically. And the refereed papers published in this volume give ample evidence of this. They are complemented by two informative descriptive pieces on family policies in Europe and on the French policies in particular. The latter are widely regarded as the only example of explicitly pronatalist policy measures that actually do have a long-term impact on the fertility level.

As every year, this volume of the Vienna Yearbook also features a ‘Demographic Debates’ section, a set of non-refereed opinion pieces on ‘hot topics’ in population research. This year they focus on the topic of this issue, but unlike for the rest of the volume the authors were also invited to address the more difficult and broader first question if they wanted to do so.

Finally, I would like to thank the two guest editors of this volume, Anne Gauthier and Dimiter Philipov for the great dedication with which they conducted the refereeing and editing of this volume.

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