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To bear or not to bear

Dondena Centre participates in the EU research project REPRO, exploring how people decide if they want to have children

Most people claim that they want to have children, but many of them never fulfil their wish. What is it that stops them? And what encourages them to have children? Solving this modern riddle is crucial to understanding current fertility trends and developing effective family policies. Demographers and other social scientists from Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Italy (Bocconi's Dondena Centre among them), the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the UK have joined forces in a research project entitled Reproductive decision-making in a macromicro perspective (REPRO). First research results suggest that factors such as gender equality, job security and the possibility to combine work and family are important. However, their influence on the personal decision about having children is not a simple one.

According to the socio-psychological Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), subjective norms and personal attitudes towards childbearing play an important role in the formation of intentions to have a child. This happens in a social context characterised by welfare regimes, family policies and cultural settings. Reproductive decision-making and behaviour thus are a consequence of the complex interplay between the individual and society. Due to the complexity of this scenario, conventional policy instruments such as child allowances and parental leave schemes may not suffice to stimulate intentions to have a child. Moreover, policies that may work in one country will not necessarily translate well into another country.

These topics were discussed at a conference organised by the Vienna Institute of Demography on 2-3 December 2010, where Icek Aizen, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts and a founding father of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, gave a keynote speech. The agenda is available at www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/in2b/. A book on the conference topic is planned for 2011. More information about the REPRO project can be found at www.repro-project.org.

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