

# Call to Action (1992)

## Abstract

---

Two years after German unification, eight prominent public figures – including politicians, academics, and journalists such as Helmut Schmidt, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, and Marion Dönhoff – accused politicians of lacking a strategy to deal with the country's most urgent problems. According to the authors, this lack of a strategy also applied to population policy. They demanded that citizens be informed of the situation and made aware of the consequences of demographic change. They explained, for example, that it would be impossible to maintain the present level of social benefits in the future, and they also noted that the country's immigration policy needed to be reassessed.

## Source

---

### So that the Germans Won't Die Out

The most recent prognoses of the Federal Statistics Office on the future development of the German population are unambiguous. Without a change in the birthrate and without immigration, the population will decline by about one million by the end of the 1990s, and then by another 2.8 million in the following decade; it will drop by 4.4 million between 2011 and 2020, and by 5.6 million between 2021 and 2030, amounting to a total population decrease of about 14 million.

This population decline coincides with a lasting shift in the age structure [of the population]. The share of the population that is over sixty is rising substantially; presently, people over sixty represent one-fifth of the population, in 2030, they will account for well over one-third. In the same period, the share of people over eighty will increase from almost 4 percent to almost 7 percent of the total population. Roughly one in fifteen residents of Germany will be older than eighty years of age. The share of people under twenty, in contrast, will drop from one-fifth (at present) to about one-sixth of the population. In 2030, the number of people over sixty will therefore be more than twice as high the number of people under twenty. In 1950, the percentages of those over sixty and those under twenty were exactly the opposite.

This demographic trend is no different from those in other industrial countries. But in Germany it has already progressed much further. Whereas the growth of the native population in almost all other industrial countries has merely slowed dramatically or at most come to a standstill, population numbers in Germany are already decreasing. The demographic trend in Germany is therefore about a generation ahead of developments in many other industrial countries. One of the consequences of this is that Germany will be the first country to deal with the experience of a declining native population.

The demographic trend in the rest of the world runs counter to the trend in industrial countries, especially Germany. Most countries are still experiencing rapid growth, despite a strong decline in the number of children per family. According to the United Nations, this will continue into the middle of the next century.

By then, the world population will likely have doubled from the present 5.5 billion to a good 11 billion. In the same period, Europeans will go from representing 14 percent of the world's population to only 7 percent. Germany's share of the world population will even go from the present 1.5 percent to 0.6 percent. The German population has several options:

- It can make provisions for its decrease in absolute size and for the rise in the proportion of the elderly.–

---

It can compensate for its numerical decline through immigration and thereby also slow down the rise in the proportion of the elderly.

– It can try to bring the birthrate back up to a level that will maintain its population size.– It can try to connect all three of the above.– It can wait and see what happens.

Each of these options has specific advantages and disadvantages.

[...]

Neither politics nor the population itself, however, is prepared for any of these changes. In fact they are both pursuing the fourth strategy and letting the developments run their course. This strategy is by far the riskiest. Its failure is virtually inevitable. It is unclear whether the damages that are already having economic and social effects can ever be repaired. This is why Germany needs to develop a clear-cut population development strategy and bring about the necessary political and social consensus. The main aspects of this strategy are:

### 1. Relief for the future

Politics and society have largely been ignoring the consequences of their present actions for the distant future; meanwhile the distant future has long since become the present. As a result, the present is being dangerously overloaded. This pertains to practically all areas of life, including the demographic development. The tendency not to consider future interests has thus become a threat to [our] existence. The entire political, social, and economic order must therefore be urgently reviewed to determine its long-term future viability and, if necessary, modified. This task must be tackled by the government and the opposition, their respective parties, research and industry, and all authorized organizations, institutions, and individuals.

2. Promoting children

Until about a generation ago, the population could count on the fact that enough children would be born to at least sustain the population without any major collective effort. The status of family policy and societal appreciation for childrearing were correspondingly low. Over a long period of time, family policy was considered hardly more than a political remnant.

The “people will always have children” principle (Konrad Adenauer) no longer applies. Because of this, the most important prerequisite in almost all areas of politics, but especially in economic and social policies, has undergone a lasting change. The demographic foundation on which all policies rest lost some of its ability to support them. This demands a radical revision of political priorities.

Stronger than previously, policies must be formulated and implemented with due attention to their demographic consequences. Family policy must be given high priority. Within social policy, family policy even needs to become the first link in the chain of all subsequent sociopolitical measures, because without a solid demographic foundation the entire system of social security will suffer.

In concrete terms: only when the reasonable material and immaterial needs of children within and outside of the family are satisfied can society tackle additional sociopolitical tasks. We must not allow material need to keep people from having children in Germany. The population must recognize that childrearing is its most vital task altogether.

### 3. Formulating and practicing a consistent immigration policy

By the end of the 1990s, the decline in Germany’s native population might well be largely compensated for by the immigration of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe. Other immigration waves might not be necessary, at least not from a strictly demographic perspective. Moreover, they might even worsen both

---

the present living conditions and the long-term age structure of the native population. If this were nevertheless permitted – for which there can be good reasons – it would be exclusively in the interest of the immigrants.

[...]

Source: “Damit die Deutschen nicht aussterben”, in Marion Dönhoff et al., *Ein Manifest. Weil das Land sich ändern muss*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992, pp. 40–50.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Call to Action (1992), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3807>> [July 05, 2025].