



Erasmus+



“Safeguarding the Human Rights of Older People through an
Intergenerational Solidarity and Active Citizenship Approach”

Intergenerational Solidarity: Selected Considerations

A Position Paper

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Introduction

The context for this Position Paper is the ERASMUS Plus: Exchange of Good Practices Project, *Safeguarding Older Persons’ Legal and Human Rights through an Active Citizenship Intergenerational Approach*. The overall aim of the Project is to develop through learning and exchange of practice how an active citizenship and inter-generational response to protecting the human and legal rights of older persons in the participating countries¹ can be advanced.

¹ The participating organisations are: Sage Advocacy (Ireland), BAGSO (Germany), Tulip Foundation (Bulgaria) and Pro Senectute (Austria).

Intergenerational solidarity

The term ‘intergenerational solidarity’ has been used a great deal in recent years.

Essentially, it is the idea of different age-groups working together for a common goal. It is about acknowledging that we all have different experiences and expertise to offer and that we can support and learn from each other. It is generally acknowledged that there are many benefits to intergenerational solidarity, both for individuals, for different age cohorts and for society as a whole.

The literature on intergenerational solidarity makes a distinction between the macrosocial level of populations and societies with age groups such as “youth” and “older people” and the micro-social level of age groups , i.e., that of small groups, most notably within the family.²

Another distinction noted in the literature is that between solidarity and conflict. The absence of conflict between generations may not be the same as solidarity between the generations.

Nature and extent of intergenerational solidarity

While there is little evidence, in Ireland or in Europe, of actual or impending conflict between the generations, population ageing is often viewed as an impending threat to the economic and social stability of post-industrial societies. The upshot of a demographic shift associated with an ageing population is that social protection and healthcare systems may become unsustainable as the demands upon them intensify while the number of net contributors decline.³ The creation of dependency among older people in contemporary society may be due as much to policies, social institutions, rules and social and cultural attitudes than ageing *per se*. Much of our economic philosophy

² https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/egm_unhq_oct07_bengtson.pdf

³ <https://www.finance.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Population-Ageing-and-the-Public-Finances-1.pdf>.

has contributed to the marginalisation of older people, disregarding their potential as workers, and viewing them as burdens on society.

In order to counteract these more negative views, it is useful to focus on the positive (an often unrecognised) contributions to society by older persons. Discussions around the costs to the exchequer of caring for and supporting older people very often neglect transfers in the other direction. Older people make a significant social contribution in providing informal support for family and friends and helping with childcare and household responsibilities. The reality is that older people very often use their pay and pensions to provide essential financial support to their families. This sharing of resources enables many families to keep their heads above water during economically challenging periods across the life-cycle.

The full acknowledgement of the vital contribution that older people make to society fosters solidarity and understanding between generations. Older people are frequently a social resource, and there are many who can and do make an economic contribution if given an opportunity. The unpaid contribution of older to voluntary activities and caring is often overlooked. Even among those who are unable to work, or who are frail and needing care, there is potential for social integration that would benefit them, and society, by bringing the generations together and fostering greater understanding between young, middle-aged and old.

Research on attitudes to older people and ageing in Europe⁴ provides a degree of confidence that understanding and reciprocity between the generations is strong at present. The vast majority of research respondents believed that governments must

⁴ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/A-New-Generational-Contract-Full-PDF.pdf>

make more money available for pensions and care for older people who require it.

The Changing Generations study,⁵ published in Ireland in 2013 (somewhat dated at this stage but, perhaps, still relevant), yielded little evidence of intergenerational conflict, either within the private or the public sphere. Notwithstanding the fact that this research involved a relatively small cohort of people and took place in a strong recessionary climate, its findings are of some interest. The research found that older people were almost universally perceived as a deserving group that merited more and improved transfers and services from the State. It should be noted that the then recession in Ireland underpinned much of the evidence gathered by the Changing Generations study which found that family generations were providing high levels of support for one another through periods of unemployment, emigration and in meeting repayments to banks.

Socio-economic status was also found to be a key variable in shaping attitudes towards care and support. Families with more economic resources can 'contract out' elements of intergenerational solidarity, in particular care of both children and older family members. Expectations regarding future family care from adult children and their families were particularly low among middle and high socio-economic status older adults whose adult children and children-in-law were in employment. An important finding was that socio-economic status was a stronger factor in difference in attitudes than generational factors.

It is reasonable to suggest that this perceived intergenerational solidarity does not fully take into account the long-term care and support needs of older persons and how this is to be provided and how it is to be paid for. There may be an inherent generational

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<https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/299852/ChangingGenerationsReportjune2013.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

conflict (certainly in Ireland) between people's wish to protect their inheritance and the right of people to get the best quality care possible in their later years.⁶

A Public Opinion Poll in Ireland⁷ carried out in 2020 found that just 21% of adults had personally considered where their preferred place of care would be if they were seriously ill or nearing death and just 17% had discussed this with a family member, friend, or other trusted person and only 5% had documented their preference. This suggests, perhaps, a tendency to assume that their family, the next generation or the State will take care of these matters. A key question arises as to whether or not this is a well-founded belief and whether intergenerational solidarity will be sufficiently strong to ensure that this happens.

The final report of the Intergenerational Commission set up by the Resolution Foundation in the UK⁸ noted that there was a tendency to drift into decisions and policies which weakened our generational contract without being aware of what we were doing. This was seen as applying both to younger and older generations, with particular reference to the significant challenges in providing the health and care that older generations expect. The point made in that report that "no longer can anyone deny the challenge facing us as a country in maintaining a fair deal between the generations" (p.8) is likely to be equally applicable to EU countries. People in employment were seen as increasingly reluctant to pay taxes and social contributions to support older people. Therein lies the basic conflict that needs to be acknowledged openly by society and addressed.

⁶ See Browne, M. (2020), Funding Long Term Support and Care for Older People – A Safeguarding Perspective, <https://www.safeguardingireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Web-Version-Funding-Long-Term-Support-and-Care-for-Older-people.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.safeguardingireland.org/80-have-not-considered-where-they-would-like-to-be-cared-for/>

⁸ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/A-New-Generational-Contract-Full-PDF.pdf>

Intergenerational solidarity and ageism

Ageism includes prejudicial attitudes toward older people, old age, and the ageing process; discriminatory practices against older people; and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older people. While ageism is not a new concept,⁹ it has been given new impetus by the World Health Organisation (WHO) which published a landmark study on ageism in 2021.¹⁰ The report noted that ageism characterises and divides people in ways which are unjust, and which lead to disadvantage and the undermining of human rights. Another important finding in the WHO analysis of research on ageism was that older people can internalise ageist stereotypes, for example, that old age is a time of social isolation and low social participation and that, as a result, they withdraw from society.

The WHO report also states that ageism starts in childhood and is reinforced over time.

“From an early age, children pick up cues from those around them about their culture’s stereotypes and prejudices, which are soon internalized. People then use these stereotypes to make inferences and to guide their feelings and behaviour towards people of different ages and towards themselves. Ageism often intersects and interacts with other forms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, including ableism, sexism and racism”.¹¹

The transition to retirement frequently signals a loss of status and role. Retired people are often seen as "naturally" disengaging, and often have little choice but to accommodate and adapt to these negative expectations.

⁹ Age Action (Ireland) (2021), *Ageism and Age Equality* ,

https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/ageism_and_age_equality_position_paper_1.pdf

¹⁰ WHO (2021), *Global Report on Ageism*, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866>

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv

Intergenerational solidarity and human rights

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights has long affirmed older people's right to live in dignity and to participate in social and cultural life. Diverse initiatives introduced during the past decade have helped increase awareness of human rights and their potential to bring about change. However, there is a need for a much stronger focus on moving from thinking about old age in terms of 'deficits' that create 'needs' to a more comprehensive one encompassing a 'rights-based' approach towards ageing. A human rights approach does not contradict the reality of age-specific needs – on the contrary, a rights-based approach enables society to better meet the needs of all age-groups, as required, while framing them in a human rights-based narrative. There is also a crucial need to create a stronger intergenerational discourse on these matters.

In light of these dynamics, international advocacy groups, including Help Age International and Age Platform Europe, national advocacy organisations and national human rights institutions are calling for a paradigm shift in the way societies think about ageing and the 'aged', shifting the policy discourse to focus more clearly on States' responsibilities to protect and work towards realising the rights of older people individually and collectively. Societies need to move from the treatment of people with long-term care and support needs as 'objects' of health and social care policies towards viewing them as 'subjects' with rights who are capable of claiming those rights based on social justice and social solidarity.

The underlying principles of a rights-based approach have been summarised as¹²:

- The inestimable dignity of each and every human being.

¹² Quinn, G. and Degener, T. (eds.) with Bruce, A., Burke, C. Castellino, J., Kenna, P. Kilkelly, U., Quinlivan, S. *Human Rights and Disability*, United Nations, New York and Geneva.

- The concept of autonomy or self-determination that demands that the person be placed at the centre of all decisions affecting him/her.
- The inherent equality of all regardless of difference.
- The ethic of solidarity that requires society to sustain the freedom of the person with appropriate social supports.

Despite the emergence of a strong human rights discourse nationally and internationally, it is likely that ‘old people’ are often thought of as a burden, especially those who need high levels of support. Ageing continues to be associated more in public and policy discourse with a ‘deficits’ perspective related to a progressive loss of physical and decision-making capabilities and on meeting their health and social care needs rather than with the positive aspects of ageing related to accumulated wisdom and experience and older people’s contribution to society.

Nils Muižnieks, former Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, stated in a Human Rights Comment in January 2018 as follows:

“Older persons have exactly the same rights as everyone else, but when it comes to the implementation of these rights, they face a number of specific challenges. For example, they often face age discrimination, particular forms of social exclusion, economic marginalisation due to inadequate pensions, or are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including from family members.”¹³

The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has commented that the energy and ideals of the old and the young are vital to realizing the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

¹³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/the-right-of-older-persons-to-dignity-and-autonomy-in-care>

“The youth and the older persons in this room have wisdom, experience, energy and ideals...We are going to ensure that all people, young and old, recognize themselves as the owners, drivers and beneficiaries of the SDGs”.¹⁴

A key question arising from the above points is - how can a stronger inter-generational dialogue about paying for long-term care in later years be instigated? In addressing this question, it needs to be recognized that generations do not operate as a binary and that solidarity across generations is key for social development and social cohesion. The issue of paying for long-term care takes on an interesting focus in the context of overall health inequalities. For example, a Central Statistics Office Research Paper in Ireland shows that people in the top layer of Irish society live five years longer than those at the bottom.¹⁵ This is surely a key consideration in terms of both social solidarity and intergenerational solidarity.

While ageing populations need to work with younger populations to foster successful and reciprocal intergenerational relations and partnerships, younger generations need to not only acknowledge the wisdom and experience of older generations but, also, and perhaps more importantly, acknowledge the need to ensure that they are safeguarded and are provided with the best quality care possible when they need it.

Younger generations

While this paper has focused primarily on intergenerational solidarity from the perspective of older people, it is important to note that prejudices surrounding age work both ways. A World Health Organisation Global Report on Ageism noted that ageism

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/08/solidarity-across-generations-is-vital-for-sustainable-development-un-special-event-hears/>

¹⁵ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/in/mdi/mortalitydifferentialsinireland2016-2017/>

against younger populations occurs in institutions such as the workplace and the legal and political systems, and in Europe it appears to be more prevalent than ageism against older people.¹⁶ Also, for example, it has been suggested that societal attitudes, beliefs and policies create a formidable barrier to young women's full participation in their communities and that negative stereotypes can exacerbate harmful norms and stigmas that prevent young women's full participation in their communities across the world.¹⁷

Overview

In order to understand the overall issue of older people in society and to challenge certain dominant attitudes it is necessary to look at older people, not only in terms of their adjustment to retirement and/or termination of familial responsibilities but, also, and more importantly, perhaps, at other prevailing social and economic processes. In addition to the low status that arises out of displacement from the work force, and termination of family responsibility, there is the general issue of dependency which is to some extent socially determined. For example, people who are pension-dependent are likely to experience difficulty providing out of their own resources for ongoing house maintenance; and for other items of expenditure necessary to maintain their quality of life. Older people are likely to experience difficulty getting loans from financial institutions in such circumstances. The trend towards the centralisation of many services in recent decades also creates a dependency on others particularly in rural areas where public transport is frequently non-existent and because the incidence of car ownership reduces with age.

¹⁶ WHO (2021), *Global Report on Ageism*, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866> p. 83.

¹⁷ UN Women Statement for International Youth Day, 12 August 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2022/08/statement-intergenerational-solidarity-creating-a-world-for-all-ages>

Demographic ageing is an issue for all generations and can best be responded to through a strong inter-generational dialogue. This needs greater impetus. For example, the final report of the Intergenerational Commission set by the Resolution Foundation referenced above noted that there was a tendency to drift into decisions and policies which weakened our generational contract without being aware of what we were doing. This was seen as applying both to younger and older generations, with particular reference to the significant challenges in providing the health and care that older generations expect.

There is a strong argument that stronger intergenerational solidarity is essential in order to address ageism in western contemporary society. A shift in attitudes is required towards the valuing and utilisation of the qualities associated with age – experience, reflection, time and a different outlook on life. This, it is suggested, would be facilitated by a clear acknowledgement that the social diversity of older people, and their related actual and potential contribution to society, is often hidden by the homogenous stereotyping of ‘older people’ as a group. Clearly older populations are as diverse as other population groups. This diversity and the positive contribution of many people in their later years should not be lost sight of as societies and governments deal with the challenge of greater numbers of people reaching very old age and greater proportions begin to live alone or experience physical dependency.

There is a need to focus more on the broader concept of all of society (young, middle-aged and older age-groups) having a shared responsibility (based on the concept of social solidarity) to look after people experiencing vulnerability across the life-cycle – children, disabled people, people with mental health difficulties and older persons who require care and support. While the role of individual families is critically important in supporting older people with care needs and should be supported by public policy

accordingly, this should not be a family responsibility only. Intergenerational solidarity in respect of care provision is broader than family and needs to be promoted across all of society as an essential part of the social support infrastructure. This will become all the more important as greater numbers reach very old age and greater proportions begin to live alone or experience physical dependency or reduced decision-making capacity associated with, for example, dementia or stroke.