

Solidarity between generations: accomplishments and remaining challenges.

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As you know, Norway is not a member of the European Union, but has participated in the European year. I find it symbolically significant that while we are gathered here in Nicosia today to discuss age and generations across political and cultural borders, another international gathering, including many heads of state, is taking place in Oslo to celebrate the Nobel peace prize for 2012, given to the EU for its efforts to maintain peace and co-operation across national borders.

I am honoured to have this opportunity to share some reflections at the end of our European year. While I was thinking of what to say, memory took me back to 1999 and another international year, the UN *year of older persons*. The theme for that year captured a global vision: *towards a society for all ages*. I had the honour of giving the keynote address at the official opening at UN headquarters in New York. In the background documents, it was clear that the theme had complex and challenging meanings, and it was more radical than most member nations realized. It referred to both *phases of life and age groups*. Society should foster and sustain inclusion and active participation across all seasons of life, thus protecting a sense of belonging and continuity for the individual. It should also facilitate and build contact, understanding and respect across age groups and historical generations.

In the European year that is now coming to an end, we have, as the theme for this conference suggests, tried to move *from vision to action*, with *active ageing* and *intergenerational solidarity* as foci. My task is to provide brief comments on the second focus. What have we accomplished?

Again-we are faced with different meanings of key terms: *generation* can refer to position in a family line of descent, to age group, or to location in historical time, what we also call cohorts. In societies characterized by complex social change, different historical generations age in different ways, reflecting the historical landscapes that surrounded their life paths. I usually find an excuse to cite anthropologist Margaret Mead, who in her old age published a book on generations.

My favourite argument made by Mead is as follows: In a society characterized by rapid social change, the old become *immigrants in time* and must learn from the young. But at the same time - for the sake of societal continuity and cohesion, the old must transmit experience, knowledge and skills to the young. In other words: we need *intergenerational learning arenas*. A key obstacle to such arenas is *age segregation*, another issue raised by the UN theme that has continued to occupy my thoughts, research and writing. Many modern, ageing societies separate age groups and generations, institutionally and spatially. Policy creation and planning for people of different ages, especially the young and the old, are typically addressed by separate national ministries and local governmental agencies. And - from quite early in life, -we spend a great deal of time in spaces where we are surrounded by a narrow spectrum of age peers and have limited contact with people who are older or younger than ourselves. Research on friendships show that across European societies, people tend to name peers as friends and very few, especially among the young, say that they have a friend, outside the family, who is in a totally different age group than they are. The oldest and the youngest - what Generations United calls *the book-end generations*, often share the fate of being denied access to central life arenas and being directed to spend a good deal of time with peers, away from other age groups. Social scientists have shown that limited contact and personal knowledge across groups often create a dichotomy between “us” and “them”, where “we” are all different and “they” are all the same. Such conditions give rise to “isms”, including *ageism*. Contact and familiarity often reduce such stereotyping. For years, I had college students do an in-depth, face-to-face interview with a person over the age of 85. Afterwards, 9 out of 10 commented: “this was a very unusual older person”. I am also reminded of an 11-year old boy who exclaimed: “That’s not an old lady- that is my grandmother!”

As a researcher who has studied and written about grandparent-grandchild relations for three decades, I find it interesting and encouraging that *grandparenthood* is central in a number of programs and initiatives highlighted in the European year, both in terms of biological family ties and, more “metaphorically” , - in programs facilitating exchange of help, contact and learning between young and old. There is growing recognition that grandparents are a significant factor in the quality of life for children and parents. Eurochild has concluded that grandparents are the most important childcare providers across all of

Europe. The same organization has taken the initiative to map the extent to which social policy in different countries recognize the contributions of grandparents. Among researchers, there are a number of recent efforts to examine how broader care regimes across welfare states present grandparents with possibilities, choices or inescapable imperatives with regard to care for grandchildren. There are also businesses and NGOs that offer “granny services” to families that do not have grandparents who can help out. It is important to recognize that in an on-going discussion of widening inequalities among European children, access to resourceful grandparents has frequently been mentioned as a significant factor.

Clearly, accomplishing age integration and intergenerational solidarity cannot be left to the family alone. A significant proportion of old persons do not have grandchildren and not all children have grandparents available.

When grandparenthood is a metaphor, it is used to convey an image of old and young working closely together, especially in learning situations. Under the auspices of EMIL there are “school grandparents” in many countries, - mature individuals who mentor and tutor children in their schoolwork. “Grandparents and Grandchildren”, G&G, is an innovative life-long learning initiative, operating in 13 countries. Here, young “digital educators” help seniors become comfortable with new communication technology. A Senior Expert Volunteer program, with an emphasis on bridging school and work, is active in 14 countries. There are numerous reports that contacts involving teaching and learning lead to the formation of more complex ties of sharing and communication across the generations. Some initiatives, such as Generations @ School, aim at promoting conversations and shared projects across age lines.

In more broad actions, there are initiatives to overcome or eliminate spatial age segregation and facilitating intergenerational contact through the creation of meeting places, especially between the book-ends. We have *Eurotowns* – communities that seek to stimulate active ageing through activities across generations, there is *Rural Youth Europe* that seeks to bridge age gaps, there Age-friendly Cities, Cities for all Generations, and several countries have intergenerational community centres.

Some of the initiatives surprised me, like “Hockey has no age barriers”, which organizes tournaments for men and women aged 17-70! I also like the annual Finnish Four-generation Carnival. If you permit, I would like to comment that we

old people need more playfulness, fun, laughter. Having children around is a wonderful licence to be playful and silly! As a grandmother I know, and I am very serious about this!!

The year has demonstrated that new communication technology can fight age segregation because we can transcend spatial barriers. A good example is a video from Help Age International, titled *Make it ageless!*

Finally, I would like to mention the work done by Homeshare International, an organization now active in at least 8 European countries. It brings generations together in micro - space, - the home. By matching old people who need companionship and help with young people who need a place to live, they create a win-win situation. In France, there is a similar national organization, Ensemble2générations non-profit network (E2G), which won a European Year award. These initiatives are good illustration of how the two visions of active ageing and intergenerational solidarity can be bridged in action. A Norwegian school principal who has been active in organizing “school grandparents” commented on how meaningful the activity is for the old participants: “It is wonderful eldercare!”

Remaining challenges

During the European year, we have attempted to put some of the visions presented by the UN into action. Now we need to evaluate the actions taken.

As a researcher, I am dismayed at how few systematic evaluations have been carried out for intergenerational programs. There are very few studies that do careful “before and after” or “with/without” comparisons, and there are only limited efforts to explore effects over time. What actions bring the best long-term effects? What do we consider the most significant and valuable effects? For old people? For children and youth? For communities? For whole societies? I could have given a whole talk on the importance of gender as a cross-cutting issue here. We have to a very limited extent asked to what degree well-functioning initiatives are dominated by women. For example, are the “grandparents” in different programs mostly grandmothers? Very little attention has been paid to the imbalanced sex ratios in many ageing European populations, created by striking differences in life expectancies. In some countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, we find a

dramatic shortage of old men, particularly in the fourth age. Children and youth need opportunities to meet, know and learn from old men.

Because I am a researcher, I would like for us to have evidence to bring to policy makers and planners when we advise them to not to take actions that reinforce and reproduce institutional age segregation, but to be inspired by the vision of *A society for all ages*.