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Intergenerational Solidarity and its Role in Shaping the Future

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Introduction

Increased life expectancy is the good news story of the 20th century; we experienced a greater extension of years during that period than in the previous five thousand years. This demographic evolution will be accompanied by profound social change.

The current crisis is further sharpening the sense of urgency for us to review fundamentally the way our society functions. Some groups have been particularly badly hit by the crisis, including the young, the low skilled, children in unemployed households, migrant workers, ethnic minorities and older people. Services provided by and commissioned on behalf of the state are faced with unprecedented financial challenges and major changes are being introduced at all levels to cut public spending. The long term social impact of what has happened in Ireland is still to emerge.

Changes in the economy and in the family are intertwined both positively and negatively. It is critical that those with responsibility for implementing the changes are acutely aware of the needs of the more vulnerable and regard social policies as a long term investment rather than just a cost to the public purse. Commentators have often referred to Ireland as being much more than just an economy. They have argued that we are a society as well, indeed going further in stating that society and economy are two sides of the same coin.

Challenges

Many changes in our society – such as geographic mobility- have led to generations frequently becoming segregated from one another – especially younger and older people. This separation can lead to unrealistic, negative stereotypes of whole generations and a decrease in positive exchanges between them. Yet these separated generations do have resources of value to each other and share areas of concern, for example, both younger and older generations are often marginalised in decision-making that directly affects their lives. Both also are subjected to negative stereotyping, sometimes towards each other.

The 2006 census recorded that there were 462,000 people aged 65+ living in Ireland; this is 11% of the population. Looking to the future, recent research²² projected that there will be 1.4 million people aged 65+ in 2041, making up more than 22% of the total population.

The debate so far is too often focused on the negative challenges of ageing, such as the need for increased expenditure on pensions, health care and social protection. It is important that this emerging situation is not seen in just strictly financial terms, such changes impose challenges on us all and requires us to explore approaches based on solidarity between the generations as a more sustainable way forward for a more equal and fair society, especially in a period of crisis.

It is critical that these challenges are addressed within a framework of enhanced solidarity and mutual co-operation. A shared and better understanding of new forms of co-existence between generations is necessary to avoid situations where they are presented as a conflict between young and older people.

These demographic changes put at stake the sustainability of the current pensions systems, which affects people from all generations and will have

²² Mc Gill, Paul. *Illustrating Ageing in Ireland North and South: Key Facts and Figures*. Belfast: Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland. 2010.

most affect on people in decades to come. Additionally, younger people are also facing the growing challenge of reconciling their working life, their family life whilst providing support for the older people in their families.

An approach which promotes greater social cohesion can play a key role in developing fairer and more sustainable responses to the major economic and social challenges that we're facing. Ireland is lagging behind in this regard. We need to be genuinely and sincerely more inclusive to enable everyone to get involved, building on the positive resources that the young and old have to offer each other and those around them.

Opportunities

There are many potential opportunities that can be harnessed as a result of enhanced intergenerational solidarity. One of the main benefits of greater intergenerational solidarity is the promotion of more cohesive communities. It has the potential to bridge the gap between generations and to allow younger people to learn from older people, the values, experience and knowledge acquired through life can be passed on while older people can benefit from young people's recently acquired and updated knowledge, the area of IT is an excellent example. Young people can also share their energy, vitality, commitment and optimism.

Why is this shared understanding and learning between generations so important?

The status quo in Ireland, has meant that in reality it is okay to exclude almost one sixth of the population from the mainstream of the life of the society, while substantial resources and opportunities are channelled towards other groups in society²³. The sharing of social responsibilities is an alternative to the status quo which, through the involvement of all stakeholders, both strong and weak, will give rise to common and sustainable solutions, fully acknowledging their contributions and

²³ Social Justice Ireland: An Agenda for a New Ireland. Socio Economic Review 2010

legitimate aspirations. We need to create a society for all. The promotion of intergenerational solidarity serves to bridge this divide and alleviate the inequality so often prevalent in Irish society.

The draft Council of Europe Charter identifies Shared Social Responsibilities as a means of securing social, environmental and intergenerational justice. It places future generations and their possibilities for development at the heart of present day decisions. The Charter encourages all stakeholders, governments, business, financial sectors, trade unions, civil society organisations, media, education, families and individuals to fully participate in the sharing of social responsibilities.

What needs to happen?

Intergenerational issues arise in most areas of public policy. It isn't and shouldn't be limited to discussions on pensions and long term care. Intergenerational solidarity needs to be developed and embedded at both a policy and a practice level: -

- Policies need to strengthen intergenerational solidarity and unite generations;
- Involve young people and older people in political processes that affect their rights;
- Exchange good practices and mutual learning between different generations;
- Provide intergenerational activities in schools and communities;
- Encourage older people to become role models for active ageing and to mentor young people;
- Initiatives need to be developed that support intergenerational contact;
- Promote and provide life-long learning opportunities;
- Identify spaces in communities that facilitate social interaction and interdependence among young and old;
- Recognise the value of volunteering and expand opportunities for young and old to participate in meaningful volunteer activities;

- Recognise and support the important role of grandparents;
- Consider the establishment of an intergenerational council of elders and young people to advise Government on policy;
- Foster co-operation among NGOs that work with children, young people and older people;
- Work with the media to provide realistic and positive images of young people and older people;

Conclusion

Intergenerational Solidarity means different things to different people. To some, it simply means that different age groups have a positive view of one another, which raises the important issue of the degree to and the way in which different generations interact. Others stress the importance of consensus between generations on the best way forward. I believe that it needs to be both of these in order to reduce the marginalisation of both young and old. Intergenerational solidarity is under threat. Social and economic changes may endanger it. We need to make conscious efforts to foster intergenerational solidarity.

The challenge that now faces us is one of building that real alternative, one that sees the economy as an instrument of social inclusion, of social harmony; we must acknowledge new challenges such as the need for intergenerational solidarity that requires us to build sustainability into all policies. If we don't intergenerational solidarity may break down and then we all will lose out.