

Speech to the UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing 2012

## **"Stimulating intergenerational dialogue and solidarity between the generations: a shared responsibility"**

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### **Abstract**

What do all generations want? A better future, without compromising the present? Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Board Member of the European Youth Forum, puts some personal reflections as to the challenges of intergenerational solidarity. Focusing on the need to re-balance the democratic life of young people, the work, pension and economic life of all people, the service provision for those at the margins of society and all through the prism of sustainable development: fulfilling the needs of today without compromising the potential of tomorrow. Finally he reflects, that many of the concerns of the old and young are similar but that caution should be made to allow autonomy for flourish within solidarity.

*FULL TEXT: CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY - TO BE SHORTENED*

We are all future generations, from the oldest of us to the youngest, living tomorrow must mean that we all have a care to make sure that the future will turn out better than today. Human progress, development and growth (in the wider sense) have improved the lives of billions of people over time, increasingly however in recent years this progress has made the lives of those on the edges of society worse not better.

This has actually affected both the oldest and youngest in society, and whilst the gap between generations can sometimes seem to be larger than ever before, I wish to put it to you that we have more to gain together, in solidarity, than we do apart. I will also, however, pose challenges to that cooperation between the generations, under-scoring sacrifices that all present generations must make for the next.

I come from European Youth Forum, the largest democratic grouping of youth organisations in the world representing almost 900 million young people in Europe. Through our network of youth organisations such as YMCA, Girl Guides and Red Cross Youth to our national youth councils (coalitions of national and local youth organisations in each country) we speak with one voice to get a better deal for the young today and for all tomorrow. Coming from the UK, my academic background is in Conflict, Peace and Education and I to work with youth organisations week in week out. Like many of us I have seen family members first hand get old, suffer the indignity of pain and pass away, but I have also seen family members, loved and looked after by their close family, sharing stories, ideas and experiences, which not only help shape all of us but pass on a vision of a better future for all, including the very weakest and overlooked in society.

“Changing societies” must not be an excuse to leave behind those who are unwilling or unable to change with them, they must be careful not to jilt the younger in preference for the elder and they must share the pain which is

always felt in social change). I wish to identify 5 key areas for young people today, and talk about how we need to build a basis of social obligations to achieve success in these areas.

### **Demographic changes lead to a need for democratic changes**

We have all seen the demographic changes in Europe, we are getting older and living longer, or to be more accurate some of us are living longer. In the rush to cater for a generation of older voters we must also understand the needs of young voters. It is therefore important that those of working age, as well as those past working age are able to contribute to the democratic life of Europe.

With young people dissatisfied with the state of European democracy, extending voting to 16 year olds should be seen as an idea whose time has come. The European Youth Forum this month will be promoting a written resolution in the European Parliament calling for votes at 16 and we have already seen the Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe support the idea. A voice for young people who are worst affected and most alienated from the formal political process must now be a corner stone of a future Europe.

Votes at 16 would re-link that intergenerational solidarity between those who are young and those that are old enough to vote providing a direct link to the concept of recognising those who have a larger stake in the future and those who wish/need to see change today.

At the next European elections the European Youth Forum will launch the League of Young Voters to build youth as a political force in Europe, this however should not be seen as competition to older generations, but in-fact a force to unite with. It is often said that young people want change now, but it is the older voters that must see the immediate change to improve their lives. Votes at 16, would start to re-dress the balance between young people being sidelined, as an electoral force it would put youth policies on the map and these are often similar to ageing policies.

Recent past generations had free education, free health care, and often a job for life; these rights and privileges were not easily won, but they have been so easily lost. New generations grow up with a higher education level than ever attained before but with worse job prospects. What is becoming clear is that the claim that financial gain is incurred through higher education is being distorted as many graduates cannot find jobs and when they do they often fill jobs in which they are over skilled thus pushing the poorest in society into further uncertainty in the job market. It is therefore important that both older and younger generations are seen to work together to support the universal service provision they both need.

### **Providing such things as transport and social services for all**

This universal provision has been eroded and the division of society, between the poor and rich, between the educated and the not educated and between the old and young continues to grow at Europe's peril.

The European Youth Forum recognises that it is often young people and old people that are the heavy users of public transport, it is often the young and old that need social services and again it is only through universality that these services can be fairly provided. The scourge that is 'means testing' is stigmatising and misses those on the edges and breaking down the principles of solidarity for all, slowly destroying the support that the young and old so often need in societies which are now more fragmented than ever.

Health services and education remains key for young people. It remains a contradiction that jobs are no longer for life but our education systems are less flexible than before. Can people really develop, up skill and re-train if the option is only open for those that can afford to pay for fees for continuing education that was once free.

It should be recognised in this new world that education holds a wider social purpose. The ability for all to access educational services, which are not just focused on employability, but also the ability to grow as a person, are vital for a multicultural and an ageing society.

### **The advancement of society must give us concern for Sustainable Development**

If we take the concept of sustainable development to heart, as the youth forum does, we need to re-focus our debates on solidarity around all pillars of achieving economic equality, social mobility and environmental protection.

Meeting the needs of today's generations without damaging the chances of future generations.

This is why the interesting idea, put forward at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development earlier this year and taken up by Ban Ki-Moon, to ensure that global governance incorporates the voices of the future generations, is so interesting.

All ages have been jilted by the past generation and whilst, political weight needs to be rebalanced to include the full participation of the younger present generation, if we are really going to further sustainable development then we need to incorporate commissioners and ombudspersons for future generations at all levels. The UNECE, already with Aarhus Convention as a Sustainable Development participation mechanism could go on to develop a future generations governance mechanism, such as already has been done on the environmental side of Sustainable Development in Hungary. This would bind the present and further generations further together.

If we had had such governance or at least oversight previously then maybe we would have not been in the situation we are today. We could have avoided the pension crises where retirement ages are pushed higher and higher, not voluntarily, but because decent pensions cannot be secured for those who are close to retirement.

## **Decent Employment for all should not exclude decent retirement for the old**

This slow destruction of the pension system has not led to more young people planning private savings, but to them giving up on their future. The feeling that the rug has been pulled from underneath generations to come by the generation that has gone before increases.

Therefore it is vital that Europe resists the tendency to raise pension ages further and to not treat young people in the employment market with contempt as it is them who pay for the present older generation and without any immediate reward for themselves and with few prospects of benefits of a future reward.

I return to “solidarity means sacrifice”. But what is sacrifice without the possibility of social advancement. Without a job, how can young people be expected to save for the future, when they are told to spend to help the economy now, how can they support themselves in the future. These are wider economic questions and one answer is we need to move away from the short term-ism of the measure of GDP, include social welfare and savings such as those of natural resources or pensions in GDP measures to recognise the investment in the future.

Action is needed now, therefore the youth forum calls for a jobs pact for young people, to ensure that they are in employment, training or education, and in turn we recognise that young people now may have to pay for the transition.

Providing dignity at work also means that people must make space for those to move up and move on. I don't mean that early retirements should be a policy that we advance (there is little evidence either way in the benefit to the economy), but a social pact must also mean that people are enabled to move on with dignity.

Security at work without offering a chance for both employee and employer to celebrate a life's employment and retire as a right, leads to harsher work practices for the older generation as employers have to then try to force them out and become less willing to employ older people. Young people should not be pitted against older workers and discriminatory measures such as the age related minimum wage don't help but harm, keeping young in underemployment. Part-time work, people "retiring" slowly with pension payments supporting this helps knowledge transfer to younger generations and are some of the solutions that we could offer.

### **In Conclusion**

I hope that I have provided a few areas of thought for you and that you are convinced that only by tackling some of the key issues, making sacrifices for the greater good, but also showing solidarity for those that are on the fringes of society that we can create truly create inter-generational solidarity. The autonomy of young people, allowing them to move away from the family and explore new ideas is vital for a progressive society. We should not expect young people to have to live with family when they tell us they want independence. Society should allow more flexible living. Young and old free to

move, but in safety with the support that is needed for both, the freedom to learn and independence to earn without reliance on others. The slogan of the youth forum "For Youth Rights" could quite easily be "For Your Rights" providing, protecting and empowering all generations.