Intergenerational Solidarity in the 21st Century – a Growing Challenge for Governments and NGOs

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It is indeed an honor to participate in the discussion on the subject of stimulating intergenerational dialogue and solidarity between the generations in the UNECE Region. The organization, which I represent here – the IFA -- is a global non-governmental membership organization, which promotes knowledge exchange of best policies and practices in the field of population ageing. The IFA aims to serve as a resource for policy makers, academic circles as well as older people and practitioners in the field of ageing.

I bring to today’s discussion the perspective of someone from the older generation who has worked on aging issues in both the NGO world as well as in the intergovernmental sector as a former official of the World Health Organization (WHO). As an NGO in Consultative Status with ECOSOC, the IFA participated actively in the deliberations of the UN/ECE Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) as well as the development of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). The current “European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations” also embraces intergenerational values as an integral part of Active Ageing. My remarks will therefore focus both on the content of intergenerational relations and the importance of stimulating solidarity between the generations in the pursuit of Active Ageing policies.

Stimulating intergenerational dialogue

As a preliminary remark and in spite of dire predictions about the decline of harmonious intergenerational relations, intergenerational solidarity appears to be alive and well in the UN ECE Region. In as much as any general statement can be made about a region of the world as vast and as multicultural as the ECE Region, families and generations continue to support and care for each other. The question is therefore how can intergenerational dialogue and solidarity between the generations be further strengthened as an overarching policy goal for the ECE Region?

In this regard, I would also like to stress the importance of the cross-cutting issues related to gender, which are inextricably linked to intergenerational solidarity. In spite of a much increased awareness regarding gender issues, they are often still the missing link when it comes to policies relating to intergenerational solidarity.
May I say, first of all, that the formulation of new policies that promote a society for all ages demands a discussion of the aspirations, contributions and needs of both young and old. It must be an on-going subject of policy deliberations at all levels – international, national and local. To give an example from the upcoming election campaign in my own country, the United States, one of the hottest campaign issues is how the very popular, public health insurance program for persons over 65 (Medicare) will continue to be provided and financed. Given the importance of this issue in the national debate, policy-makers will have to give a fair hearing to all sides.

The overall objective of a society for all ages is to encourage and maximize the potential of both men and women throughout the entire life course, including life at older ages. While organizations such as IFA and others primarily advocate on behalf of the world’s older population, we never lose sight of the fact that intergenerational policies and programs have to be fair and affordable for all generations. This is particularly true when societies begin to experience significant demographic shifts from a younger to an older population. While this may create stress and even potential areas of conflict, it has to be recognized that intergenerational solidarity is the glue -- even under stress -- that holds families and communities together and that actively contributes to a more stable and prosperous society. There is also no doubt that intergenerational solidarity enables individuals to reach their full potential during the various stages of the life course, from younger to older ages.

**Intergenerational and gender issues in the provision of care for frail older people**

Throughout the centuries, the family has always been the mainstay in the provision of care for people of all ages who need care. This includes children, young people, persons with disabilities, and older people who experience a decline in functional capacity and need help with activities of daily living. How such care is provided differs among the countries of the UN ECE Region, so that today there is a complex and rich variation in how families and governments practice intergenerational solidarity.

For example, according to UNECE research (UNECE Policy Brief No 7, November, 2010), Nordic countries in the Region provide support to a high proportion of frail older persons based on a model of decentralized publicly-provided home care services. As a result, the proportion of persons over 65 living in residential care institutions is the lowest in the ECE Region, amounting to only around 3.3 percent. However, the proportion of older persons living in residential homes is also similarly low in other countries of the Region -- primarily in Southern Europe -- which have maintained a strong tradition of providing family care at home, rather than relying on publicly provided services.
In commenting on intergenerational family relationships in aging societies in the UNECE Region, (UNECE, 2010), Professor Pearl Dykstra of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, warned that population aging is not only about older persons but also how it affects the relationships of persons of all ages. In particular, she draws attention to the importance of gender influences on intergenerational relations. According to Professor Dykstra, it is important to address explicitly the ways in which legal and policy arrangements constitute differential opportunities and constraints for men and women across generations and family.

She points out that:

1. There is little evidence that people are less inclined to care for family members if public provisions are available.
2. Interdependencies between generations and between men and women in families are built and reinforced by the legal and policy arrangements in a given country.
3. Women’s integration in the labor force has largely taken place without fundamental changes to the formal and informal rules associated to the male breadwinner model.

In conclusion, her overriding message to government policymakers is that national policies should seek to support intergenerational care regimes without reinforcing both social class inequalities and gender inequalities.

The question is therefore how can we most effectively and efficiently promote intergenerational solidarity without at the same time undermining the well being of the poor and the vulnerable, without limiting the choices for women to pursue their careers outside the home, and without diminishing the economic and health security enjoyed today by so many older citizens of the UNECE region?

**The challenges of intergenerational policy making**

While the overarching goal of any government is to ensure both effectiveness and affordability in developing intergenerational policies -- unintended consequences and errors can and do occur. And, they may often become apparent only after several decades have passed. Let me provide you with some examples:

- Cuts in survivors’ benefits and dependents’ benefits in social security programs that are based on the assumption that women are protected by their own social security records, may in fact leave many women both economically and socially vulnerable. This is particularly the case at older ages when the opportunity to build adequate retirement savings has passed them by.
Another example of doubtful intergenerational policy has been the push toward earlier retirement, resulting in the premature exclusion of many older workers, both male and female, from the workplace, leaving these premature retirees with lower entitlements and lower lifelong income security.

The lack of financial literacy or inadequate information about the consequences of many key life decisions – such as schooling, health promotion and prevention, skills training, retirement planning, etc. -- may have long-term consequences that result in heavy strains on the individual, the family and ultimately the government forced to deal with categories of the population who are both marginalized and vulnerable.

Intergenerational policies may thus have very long-term effects. The question is therefore how can we do a better job for the future in formulating intergenerational policies, particularly when the demographic weight of the generations will be very different than it is today? I would like to put forward three suggestions for consideration by the participants here today:

- The social partners, governments, NGOs and academia, should explore, research and document innovative ways and models that ensure the participation of and the fair treatment for all generations as they move through the life course. This means it is not only desirable but necessary to ensure the constant assessment by governments, NGOs, and academia of the intergenerational impact of public policies.

- Concerted efforts must be made by all parts of civil society to make available the critical information, statistics and evaluations to consumers and voters to promote a better-informed level of public debate and dialogue. This will help ensure that all generations will better understand their stake in society. Governments should have an obligation to make critical data and evidence-based information available and accessible to civil society in order to monitor and assess change.

- NGOs and civil society -- to be effective in representing the overarching interests of their constituents -- should build intergenerational coalitions with other civil society partners. Examples are cooperation of older people with youth organizations, the disabled with trade union leaders, teachers with religious organizations, and women with a broad spectrum of NGOs working for child and maternal health, better education, equal opportunities, and last but not least economic security in old age.

Ensuring more balanced policies to protect and promote intergenerational solidarity has always been a challenge throughout the ages. But currently this challenge has been
immensely exacerbated by the worldwide economic recession of the last decade, coupled with rapid demographic aging in both developed and developing countries.

While many NGOs and social partners have seen their resources cut in the face of the economic slowdown, a lack of intergenerational leadership and vision at this point in time could result in serious threats to intergenerational solidarity in future years. Questions will therefore have to be raised and answered about the long-range and differential impact of economic and social policy decisions on children, women, families, workers, the disabled, and finally on all of us as we age.

The graying of our populations resulting from falling birth rates and longer life expectancies will compel all countries in the Region to reexamine many of their public policies, including guarantees for retirement, universal access to health care, access to higher education and training, equal access to employment for both men and women, protection of the environment as well as policies in many other domains.

Some adjustments to education, health and pension systems may therefore have to be made to ensure their future solvency and effectiveness. Will these changes be made while at the same time fostering improved intergenerational solidarity or will the criticism prove correct that it is far easier to delay action and kick those hard decisions down the road to future generations?

When we realize that we will soon be living in a world where the 60+ population exceeds that of children under age 15, we also realize that we are no longer living in a "business as usual" environment. A better informed and widely disseminated dialogue on intergenerational solidarity among all the stakeholders will be necessary in all UNECE countries and regions, regardless of their respective levels of economic prosperity. This dialogue will be essential to ensure that we achieve the societies in which our children and older people would aspire to live.