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Challenges to Dialogue and Understanding Across Generations Some Lessons from Latin America

Intergenerational relations are an expression used to discuss a variety of interactions among persons of distinct generations. I believe that a multidisciplinary approach that addresses political, economic, social and psychological dimensions is the best strategy for understanding these relations and establishing a dialogue. In the broad field of intergenerational relations a variety of theoretical, research and practical approaches have been used to address diverse goals. Among these goals, a “society for all ages” that seeks solidarity across generations, appears to be central. An agenda seeking a “society for all ages” was largely inspired by a series of UN international and regional conferences (e.g. Madrid, 2002; Brasilia; 2007) amidst population aging trends. This agenda evolved over time, reflecting changing conceptual perspectives and practices. As a consequence of this evolving agenda, intergenerational social programs themselves also changed; from a traditional focus on leisure activities, learning experiences and friendship for diverse age groups to a source of solution for social problems. The intergenerational programs are conceived as a way of continued exchange of resources and learning between the old and young generations to achieve individual and social benefits (Hattan-Yeo and Ohsako, 2001). The experience of intergenerational programs such as those pioneered by the United States since the 1960s (Newman, et al, 1997), and the most recent debate on legislation to curb ageism in the EU countries are some references to these changes.

Briefly, from a narrow demographic perspective concerned with the needs of a growing elderly population, intergenerational relations came to be viewed as important to both individuals and society. At first intergenerational programs focused on learning and exchanging between the old and young. At a second moment, the predominant view was that intergenerational relations should not be restricted to families but expanded to communities and nations. In this case, intergenerational programs served to promote integration and cohesion both among individuals and societies. Finally, analysts recognized that the cohesion and equilibrium of most societies are based on a more complex set of intergenerational relations. With this perspective, the interactions among generations became a crucial part of the social welfare systems as well as key elements for the economic development of nations. This most recent perspective, -- stimulated by the European Community (2005)--, stresses that to achieve intergenerational solidarity, new elements such as equal opportunities and combat to discriminations are crucial parts of a strategy to achieve a “society for all ages”. Age, gender, race, sexuality or any other

prejudices and discrimination are not acceptable.¹

Some conceptual and methodological distractions or key issues to consider

The role of institutions in improving or limiting intergenerational relations has been mostly discussed in terms of the family, the state, communities, and the labor market. In the spirit of broadening the agenda towards a “society for all ages”, I would like to suggest three elements to be considered in the discussions for improving dialogue and understanding across generations.

I. The key structuring role that social networks plays in the process of interactions across generations. The idea is that wellbeing and levels of solidarity should be viewed as an outcome of chains of influences that are neither random nor deterministic. The improvement of intergenerational relations would not be facilitated by mere ideas, cultural or material bases, but they would also be produced in the intersection of external shocks and network configurations (Collins, 1998). One way to see this influence could be through the social capital individuals acquire through the resources they have access to via different networks. Therefore, fostering dialogue and understanding across generations involves a broad range of institutions and actors as well as the recognition of both the cooperative and the conflictive aspect of interactions across generations. The potential conflict of interest across generations has been largely discussed in terms of the economic inequalities between age groups, and was inspired by the “intergenerational equity” perspective. Another approach, the “political economy of aging”, sharply contrasts with the equity model. This approach considers the contract between generations in terms of socially constructed roles, relationships, dependencies and obligations at micro (family and kinship) and macro levels (state, market and policies). It offers more room for the discussion of both the cooperative and conflictive aspects of intergenerational relations (Walker, 1993). The bulk of the studies on generational relations in both perspectives recognize the existence of some conflict between generations but there is much disagreement about the nature of the conflict depending on the theoretical approaches as we discussed for the Brazilian case before (Goldani, 2005).

II. The so called principle of “intimacy from a distance” appears to be the current desirable mode of interaction among generations. In a few decades, strong social and economic changes have promoted transitions from a family world governed by traditional norms and gender roles to diverse forms of individual autonomy. As a consequence the expectations of support and

¹ A wider debate about the potential of promoting relationships and exchange between the young and old as an integral part of social and public policy and based on different national experiences, is presented by Hattan-Yeo and Ohsako (2001).

personal exchanges were redefined and rather than cohabitation, is the growing “intimacy at a distance” that makes logistics of intergenerational relations more complex. The globalization of singledom, meaning the rise in the number of people who are living alone can be viewed as an example of these changes. A large-scale trend, with diverse forms and rhythms, singledom is associated with the process of individual autonomy and search for identity, and it varies by country depending on the level of development of the individualization process. Although singledom could represent an extra source of support for the old and the reinforcement of intergenerational relations, its effect is way more complex. Single women keep a greater distance between themselves and their parents than married women. They don’t want to be seen as old maids going out with their old parents or to confirm expectations that as singles they are available to do the “care” work. Singledom is also seen as a risk to society to the extent that it threatens the reproduction of the family which is considered central to the process of intergenerational relations (Kaufmann, 2008). In fact, kinship continues to play a very important role, and the desire to stay in touch remains strong. However, such ties often take an elective and occasional form, as members of the family network hold tightly to their autonomy, at all cost.

III. The influence of a sophisticated media system, --in the context of global flows of people, ideas and images-- challenge local cultures and reinventing relations across generations. The technological dissemination of ideas and images across national boundaries also challenges people’s values, norms and beliefs. Participants in computer networks form new types of communities that become very real and important part of their everyday lives. The cyberspace community can be solidary faster than any other community, not only in political upheaval, as demonstrated by recent events, but also in providing economic, emotional, medical and various types of support to their members. These networks represent more than channels of information; they are also channels of interpersonal connection (growing dating sites are only one example). In the actual context of short-term relationships, rapid flows of people, and instability, Rubin (1996), suggests that computer networks could well become the twenty-first century’s “ties that bind”. The connections between people through computer networks have both limiting and liberating potential.

What should we do? Which questions should we try to answer?

To Improve the Dialogue and Understanding of Relations Across Generations

By identifying some critical conditions that promote or impede dialogue and understanding across generations, we can also inform policies to advance the agenda for a society for all ages. We agree that although “families still may value the elder as the transmitter of cultural lore, preparing younger individuals for life in the modern and more complex world has become a function of wider social groups that are non-familial” (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008). There is now a need for new paradigms that include not only changes in families but also

“extrafamilial” aspects. Thus we would like to suggest some of the elements we consider important in rethinking relations across generations.

1. Drop the idea that solely certain type of family arrangements can predict the quality of intergenerational relations. Pay attention to the diverse and fluid family arrangements and how this dynamic can help or restrain interaction across generations. People living in non-family households also have family responsibilities but they usually are not “counted”, either for society or by their employers. Individuals who spend several days a week caring for an aging parent in the parent’s separate residence (one in four American households today is providing substantial time and care to an ageing relative, and more than half of all households say they are expected to do so within the next 10 years). Or as was said before, “the place where we keep our clothes isn’t always the only place where we keep our commitments”.

2. People’s new life styles, combined with the undeniable changes in couple arrangements make it increasingly hard to capture new family realities in old survey categories. Thus, using such categories to talk about families and relationships across generations has policy consequences. Many people now live so much of their lives outside marriage and we should raise our expectations for, and commitment to other types of relationships. We need to restructure both work and social life so we can reach out and build ties with others, including people who are single and divorced. Women who entered the work force discovered social contacts and friendships outside home and need deep emotional connections with others, not just their husbands. Studies in the US found that men and women with confidants beyond the nuclear family were mentally and physically healthier than people who relied on just one other individual for emotional intimacy and support (Coontz, NYT OPED 2007).

3. Mutual understanding across generations is associated with how attitudes toward equality in the family shift across and even within generations. How are these attitudes shaped now and how do they translate into interaction? The balance between family and work didn’t change much within the families, by gender and across generations. Women all over the world already figured out how disadvantageous their traditional responsibilities of care can be. In fact, individual’s life course and family needs can conflict and compromise the idea of cohesion or solidarity. Shifting opportunities and constraints are a big part of the story and shape rational decisions. However, there are also changes in individual attitudes and values that lead people to prefer more egalitarian relationships and domestic arrangements (Treas and Drobnic, 2010). Therefore, as Amartya Sen noted, family is a “space of cooperative conflict” and this is a good way to begin the dialogue about relations across generations.

4. Vulnerability in relations across generations has to do with power structures, which are shaped or sometime modified by provincial or local customs. A global view of intergenerational relations must be sensitive to the diversity in which these powerful canons of authority exist. Thus, in order to compare models of interactions between generations, we first

have to understand some of the local history in terms of the norms, rights and duties and consider the roles of different institutions. How can different institutions and actors in a specific society provide resources to enhance solidarity across generations? How much should inequalities (income, race, ethnicity and gender) among individuals be considered in designing new intergenerational programs?

5. What is important is not the contribution of each generation but most of all the value each generation adds through its relation with others to the community, society and individuals. The relationship between generations produce more benefits that the sum of their contributions and the emphasis should be put in the concept of synergy as something relatively new in the field of intergenerational relations. The idea is that the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts refers to the set of actions performed by generations in search for certain goals. In this interactional process, generations become connected among themselves and will be affected in their profiles. It is important to note that the synergetic movement will not happen randomly but it results from a series of elements that favor its occurrence. Some of these issues are already considered in a new social paradigm that advanced the notion of synergy between various aspects of a community's social structure (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

Final Remarks

Despite the emphasis on the role of institutions in shaping relations across generations, (family, state, market, media, religion, etc..), the fact is that our societies are made by individuals and after all it will be their actions and inactions that will determine how interactions and solidarity across generations will form in the future . The rapid pace and amount of societal changes all over the world is challenging the various social contracts (gender, kinship, and policy) which makes some people feel unsettled. There is also an idea that traditional solidarities across generations are at greater risk than ever before. However, I would like to argue that the increase in such risks and the changes on the old ways of interacting, for example within the kinship group, doesn't mean a breakdown of institutions like the family. We should remember that in periods of strong changes there are also greater opportunities to do things in better ways (or worse ways too), depending on individual and societal structures. Therefore, in this moment of critical transitions, the future of intergenerational relations will depend on the actions of different actors.

The huge scale of contemporary uncertainty is a product of history and from the most recent wave of modernity in Western countries; individuals have discovered a new sense of autonomy and a wider range of choices that now exist in most of the domains. Although historical events may have set the stage for current behaviors across generations, it is only by systematically challenging traditional hierarchies and by learning and practicing new forms of interactions, that we will be able to achieve a genuine improvement in intergenerational relations. One of the major techniques for avoiding conflict involves building on each generation's strengths and allocating

complementary roles. Then, it is not enough to analyse the opposing positions of young and old generations as simply an inheritance from the past, and it is even less important to consider it purely as a biological age factor. It will be from modifications in the interactional mechanism itself that improvements will be possible. Equality of opportunities across generations and respect for the individual is a far cry from the imposition of hierarchical and imposed assignment of roles. Finally, the conflict between the ideal model of intergenerational relations and the reality of relations across generations will continue challenging our discussions for a very long time to come.

Some Lessons from Latin America

It is a commonplace to say that Latin America is the most unequal region in the world. The region is characterized by relatively low levels of GDP, high social and economic inequality and it is in the middle of a profound demographic changes. Compared with other emerging regions, Latin America has a relatively large public sector and a rapidly-ageing population, combined with one of the world's highest levels of inequality in income distribution (CEPAL, 2010). At the same time, it is well accepted that there are variations among the countries of the region, limiting any generalization about the current situation and the future of the intergenerational relations. Regarding interaction across generations, there is a strong tradition of solidarity among family members in the region although at this moment it is said that there is a "crisis of care" ("una crisis del cuidado"), as a result of a simultaneous reorganization of the salaried/paid work (trabajo salarial remunerado) and the non-paid domestic work. Both occur in the context of a continued rigid sexual division of domestic work and gender segmentation on the labor market. These asymmetries are expected to be threatening the continuity and equilibrium of traditional arrangements of care in the Latin American societies. (Espejo, et al. 2010).

Latin America is still a relatively "young region" and the current financial crisis that left record numbers of people jobless had a particularly harsh effect on young workers. Although much of Latin America is recovering faster than elsewhere, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that 600,000 young people in the region have been left unemployed by the crisis – putting a strain on governments and reversing gains made from 2003 to 2008. It also put strain on the majority of household-families that are heavily concentrated in their activities of childrearing. The structure and distribution of households through life cycle stages help to understand the challenges for care activities in the region. A generational typology of households in 2008 shows that 5.6% of households were multigenerational, 36.9% one-generational, 48.2% without elderly adults, 9.1% with no children present and 0.3% without an intermediary generation present. Consistently, the distribution of these households by life cycle stage shows the majority in the stage of expansion (17.2) and consolidation (33.4) ; while households in the initial stage of formation were comprised of 10.2% married couples with children and 4.5% without children. Only 10% of households were formed by old couples

without children present and 24.6% were couples with children leaving home (“shrinking stage”) (Rico, 2010).

The challenges of high levels of unemployment that mark the present and the future of the young generation appear as good examples of how “social risks” are related to intergenerational practices. Unemployment among young workers is typically about two to three times that of adults in the region. In 2008, of 18 countries in Latin America where data was collected, 13.4 percent of young people were unemployed compared with 4.5 percent of adults. Even more worrisome, nearly 20 percent of youth in the region are neither studying nor looking for jobs, threatening to become a “lost generation,” according to the ILO. Despite the recent improvements in the Brazilian economy and in the system of redistribution of economic and social benefits, challenges remain. The 2009 ILO report shows that those under age 30 make up 60 percent of the unemployed. The youth thus face a series of contradictions that deepen conflicts with the adult world. At the same time that globalization requires more education and skills, they have less access to employment and at the same time that they are exposed to new technologies and sources of information, they are left out of decision-making power. They have greater individual autonomy but less financial autonomy. All of this matters because it could create a frustrated 'lost generation' of young adults who give up on career aspirations and they may turn to crime or illegal activities. Their family trajectories are also affected because they lack resources. Youth can't get married or start their own families and they end up staying longer at home and in need of support.

The most recent Social Panorama for Latin America recognizes that unlike previous economic crises, the region faced the 2009 crisis in better conditions, thanks to a set of new public policies which lessened the impact on social and work conditions (CEPAL, 2010:11). The novelty is the institutionalization of a series of social programs that seems to be a reference for a new stage of development in the region. Among those, the Conditional Cash Transfer Programs gained special attention and by the end of the 1990s, they became a common strategy to combat poverty in the region. These programs, mostly focused on poor families with children begun as early as 1981 in Chile and with different formats: Argentina (1997), Brazil, (2003), Chile (1981, 2002), Colombia (2001), Costa Rica (2000), Dominican Republic (2005), Ecuador (2003), Honduras (2000), Jamaica (2001), Mexico (1997) and Peru (2005). Therefore, Latin America countries, like those in other developing regions, are implementing a series of cash transfer programs that are oriented towards the children and the population in situations of “pasividad laboral”, which is equivalent to unemployment or even retirement (Lo Vuolo, 2010). Some other examples have to do with the non-contributive pensions among person at old ages. Some of these examples are: the experience of the non-contributive universal pension system in Bolivia called “Renta Dignidad”, the universal food pension in Mexico city called the “Pension Alimentaria Universal”, and the non-contributive rural pensions in Brazil. Recent results suggest that Conditional Transfer Cash Programs (CCT) benefit 20% of Latin American families with children and youth under very high levels of poverty. Simulation analysis show

that those programs would be able to reduce between 25 and 30% of poverty in countries like Guatemala and Nicaragua, if they were expanded in the current format. CEPAL's report suggests that cash transfer programs should continue and the distribution should consider age group needs under a life cycle perspective. And the World Bank (2009) suggests that these programs are efficient tools in the short run by cutting poverty measured by income and in the long term it increases the formation of human capital by maintaining children in school, and as such they function as a mechanism to disrupt the inherited character of poverty in the region. A critical perspective of the CCTs sustain that they do not represent improvements in social policy regarding developmental models but in fact they still represent an "assistencialist-repressive and productivist paradigm" (paradigma asistencial-represivo y productivista) which was part of social policy in Latin America for a long time. The main argument is that the discourse of human capital in relationship to the expenses of children didn't change the essence of these policies. The programs only add new criteria to measure the meritocratic efficiency of expenditures, which remain very low in comparison to most social spending items in these countries (Lo Vuolo, 2010).

What are the roles of public and private transfers resources across generations today and in the future?

The Latin America Case

The "Social Panorama of Latin America", (CEPAL, 2010), which focuses on the life cycle and on the reproduction of unequal opportunities for sustainable social mobility over an individual's lifetime for the region, is our main source in trying to answer the above question. This report mostly discusses how differences created and consolidated during childhood and youth stages of life entrench the intergenerational reproduction of poverty and inequality. The findings presented by the "Social Panorama in Latin America" respond to a growing interest in public transfers as a mean of combating poverty and inequality in the region. In doing this, it improves former studies in the region by controlling the effects of transfers on both age and individual's socio-economic status.

The overarching message of this report is that "the position on the social scale is more than the sum of personal circumstance, effort and decisions. There is a structure of opportunities provided by States, markets, families and communities that are largely beyond the individual's control and that colour prospects for social mobility and access to well-being" (CEPAL, 2010: 1). By sharing this message, I would like to note that it is in the context of these institutions that the process of intergenerational relations will be shaped. However, as was said before, the social networks play a crucial structuring role in this process, by providing for the needs and opportunities of individuals across generations.

Some Findings

The Social Panorama for Latin America in 2010 suggests that “the State’s transfers and its regulatory mechanisms fall short of the mark in addressing inequalities of origin. In other words, the start in life for the children of Latin America depends a good deal on family circumstances. Families, in turn, depend a good deal on the market and receive little support from the State”. Therefore, the lack of robust transfer systems targeting families with children; limited coverage, care and protection by the State during infancy; low penetration of preschool systems; short school days; the system’s inability to retain students during secondary school; and the lack of support for young people and young adults as they become autonomous: these are all factors that dramatically limit the prospects for future social mobility for children born into lower- income sectors.

The analysis of the role of education as one of the State’s best tools for reversing the intergenerational reproduction of inequality and decoupling an individual’s social background from future well-being outcomes concludes that the region has not turned the education system into a driver of equal opportunity. Because, while there have been significant advances in education in recent decades, expanding access has also led to greater supply-side segmentation in attainment and in quality. Thus, social and cultural disadvantages that burden lower-resource students as they enter the educational system are compounded by access to lower-quality education services than are available to students with more resources and then it reinforces the inequality of their learning paths.

The system of public and private transfers centre on age groups that tend to consume more than they produce: children and young people, and older adults the report conclude. The main argument here is that the high concentration of poverty in the early stages of life, the low level of public transfers targeting children and young people and the segmentation of educational attainments and learning (combined with the structural core of an unequal production matrix and labour market) are among the factors that explain, in part, the persistent inequality in Latin America countries. By using the National Transfer Accounts (NTA) system, --a new approach to measuring aggregate flows of economic resources between age groups over time--,² the report insists on the need to rethink the intergenerational distribution of public transfers, not only to check the reproduction of inequality throughout the life cycle but also to prepare for the rapid ageing of the population. In addressing these issues a set of measures involving cash transfers to vulnerable households with children aged 0-14 is discussed under the assumption that those would improve the odds that the family will have an appropriate environment for child socialization (nutrition, housing, clothing). Another group of measures envisions another

² . *These accounts include flows associated with transfers and capital accumulation, distinguishing those passing through public institutions from those in the private sphere (CEPAL, 2010)*

set of cash transfers for employment and training services targeting young people in the process of becoming emancipated adults (15-24 years of age).

The analysis of the incidence of public spending by age group and socio-economic level (defined as the educational level of the head of household) and by sectoral composition (education, health care and social spending) shows that a greater proportion of public transfers targets older persons, while families account for most of the transfers to children and young people and that is particularly true for Brazil (CEPAL, 2010). This pattern holds at all socio-economic levels but it is significantly stronger at the highest level. The absolute progressivity of public spending is generally greatest in the case of children; it diminishes with rising age and then turns regressive, with greater benefits at the highest socio-economic levels. These differences are due to a large extent to the greater labour incomes of persons with higher educational levels, a determining factor in pension benefits. In Brazil, the point at which spending becomes regressive is age 45 and Chile is 54.

Are the public and private transfers helping to promote intergenerational relations (and solidarity) in Latin America?

The findings show the importance of public social spending as an instrument for channelling resources to the poorest population segment and of the importance of social development as a driver of economic development that led the region's countries to gradually increase this type of spending. Thus, the increase in social spending could be viewed as carrying an implicit concern with intergenerational reproduction and practices of solidarity, although it is not stated in these terms in the Social Panorama for Latin America. In pointing to the levels of deprivation and inequality between and within age groups, the findings suggest the difficulties and costs of reproduction for individuals of different groups. Under the perspective of human rights and social justice, --the principles guiding any intergenerational community development project-- these findings are indicative not only of how public and private transfer influence the interaction among age groups but also the different needs of those groups. These findings however, fall short of showing how solidarity between generations flow through the public and private transfers. Regarding this issue, previous studies noted the existence of a reverse intergenerational flow, where benefits to the old end up benefitting younger generations instead of the old getting resources from the young (Saad, 2005, Camarano, 2005). To some people this flow is considered unnatural or even wrong because, implicitly the social contract within the kinship group expects a unidirectional exchange between generations (resources flowing from the young to the old).

In fact, broadly framed under the perspective of "distributional justice between age cohorts", the analysis of the public and private transfers for Latin America implicitly assumed that some age groups are benefiting from the public transfers in detriment of others (Zero- Sum Game). The classical economic rationale of the analysis noted that public and private transfers are

centered on age groups that tend to consume more than they produce and then there is a need to rethink the system of public and private transfers. It also recognized that the state, market and families are responsible to generate mechanisms to develop individual's skills to compete for social mobility. However, the extent that individualism and competition for resources can be hurtful for the relationship across generations is not a concern. In conclusion, in putting emphasis on both inequality between groups and within groups, --e.g. poor students benefit less from the public transfers and has worse educations regardless of their age—the analysis paradoxically questions the main assumption of the equity model. In other words, how can the competition for public and private resources between age groups (a central issue of the intergenerational equity approach used), be evaluated in the noticeable context of inequality within age groups as noticed by the Social Panorama for Latin America.

What do we learn from the Latin American case?

We learned that creative social policies and expansion of social protection systems can be crucial in changing the lives of the most needy and for improving citizenship. Despite all the criticisms of the Conditional Cash Transfer Benefits, including fostering political clientelism with a strong negative gender bias, there are some positive results too. For example, the inclusion of the poor in a dynamic cycle of receiving a regular payment of benefits and accomplishing the obligation of sending children regularly to school as well as visiting public health centers, has meant more than simply better economic conditions. For the first time, the very poor are socially visible and have an opportunity to express their demands to the State (Lavinás and Ferraz, 2011). In other words, the beneficiaries of CCTB earn social legitimacy and recognition that they didn't have before. Thus, the Conditional Transfer Cash Benefits, as experienced in its different versions, helped to move the debate from an exclusively economic realm to culture in general. It introduces new actors and questions in the process of democratization and achievement of a full social citizenship. These new programs seem to be achieving both recognition and redistribution. Finally, the examples of Latin America non-contributive pensions remind us that the problem of private versus public solutions is a false contradiction. Society's willingness to benefit from families's caregiving and its unwillingness to share the costs will not go far in promoting cohesion and even less in terms of social and economic development.

We also learned that to advance a dialogue and understand relations across generations in broad terms, we should try to unlock the debate on intergenerational relations from the trap of economic management. Although the scale and allocation of public spending appears as a crucial source to support the reproduction and interaction across generations, we should advance the idea of multidimensionality of intergenerational relations and how those are related to solidarity practices. We also learned the importance of submitting technical discourses and their assumptions to a critical review because it is the way to politicize the debate on solidarity across generations and welfare. To the extent that the technical discourses and knowledge

ignore the need for public, resources of solidarity between generations, and even try to disqualify the benefits and social programs oriented to certain groups (in general to the old as a non-productive group), they stimulate less participation from the State in promoting intergenerational solidarity. Therefore, we should be aware of the different perspectives and their normative and policy implications because the example of Latin America indicates that institutions and policy makers are not only managers of social risks but they can also be powerful sources in creating risks. By exercising their decisions of power, they can also threaten the action of social movements and generate unnecessary conflict.

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