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Existing framework for dialogue and mutual understanding across generations: family, community, educational institutions and workplace

Focus

Countries, communities and our world face unprecedented changes in demographics challenging the ways in which people of all generations interact with each other, in families and the broader community, and their ability to contribute throughout their lives. Many developed countries grapple with ageing societies while developing countries are more likely to have large younger populations restless for opportunities. This paper will explore three areas outlined by the organizers of the Expert Group Meeting on Dialogue and Mutual Understanding across Generations. These are young people, communities and educational institutions and the roles they may play in enhancing intergenerational dialogue and mutual understanding. The work place and changing family structures will be touched upon briefly. Given the bulk of my work is in the USA, the paper will reflect that limitation although I have tried to include examples learned through my work with the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes or ICIP.

Relevance

Society is aging but our policies and institutions remain for the most part, segregated by age. Intergenerational dialogue can promote cross generational understanding and mutual respect. Young people, communities and educational institutions have been instrumental in supporting the compact between generations. Yet each can be more intentional working towards a world that values and engages all generations ultimately maximizing the use of our most precious commodity, human capital.

Young people are sometimes overlooked. However their contributions can be and are significant. Take for example the area of technology. While older adults are embracing technology at a rapid rate younger generations have never known a world without technology. A study by The Pew Charitable Trusts found that between April 2009 and May 2010, adults in the USA age 65 and over increased their use of social networking by 100%. Still this only meant growth from 13% to 26% as compared to young people age 18 to 29 who increased their use by 13% from 76% to 86%. Whether for entertainment, mobilization or socialization, young people tend to engage electronically without a second thought. They can play a vital role in mentoring and teaching elders about how to use technology helping to keep elder's skills up to date, build social cohesion and encourage dialogue.

Communities are critical in the lives of young and old. Often the middle generations have broader work and social spheres while the lives of the bookend generations, our older and younger, are more likely to be limited geographically to a narrower area or neighborhood. Communities and the social institutions within them can be welcoming to all generations when they are accessible, safe and stimulating.

Educational institutions, often thought of as the domain of the young, can establish programs that engage older adults as volunteer and are open to older, lifelong learners. Use of educational facilities by multiple generations will for the most part mean greater use of a community's physical assets and provide a natural gathering place supporting dialogue between generations.

Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

Intergenerational interaction can result in positive outcomes for all generations. While intergenerational program research and evaluation in the USA is somewhat limited by the size and scope of many of the programs, the documented outcomes are quite positive. For example:

- Children in intergenerational programs had higher personal/social developmental scores (by 11 months) than children in non-intergenerational programs.ⁱ
- Youth involved in intergenerational mentoring relationships showed increases in school attendance, positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding substance use, as well as improvement in related life skills.ⁱⁱ
- Over a single school year, students with older adult tutors made over 60% more progress in learning two critical reading skills – sounding out new words and reading comprehension – than similar students without the tutors.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Older adults who regularly volunteer with children burned 20% more calories per week, experienced fewer falls, were less reliant on canes and performed better on memory tests than their peers.^{iv}
- Older adults with dementia or other cognitive impairments experience more positive affect during interactions with children than they did during non-intergenerational activities.^v
- While 68% of volunteers agree that volunteering made them feel physically better^{vi}, older adults are most likely to receive the greatest health benefits from volunteering.^{vii}

At the same time young people in the USA are engaging in their communities and volunteering at unprecedented rates. Positive youth development has provided a framework for engaging youth as resources and true partners in civic life. More opportunities are being created for them to exercise and demonstrate their leadership abilities. Such opportunities support young people as they develop a range of skills, including critical thinking, writing, public speaking, planning and group dynamics.^{viii} The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth found that youth involved in philanthropic programs continue to volunteer their time, contribute money to charitable causes and serve in leadership positions at higher rates than the general population. Further, two-thirds of today's adult volunteers report they began volunteering when they were young.^{ix}

The intergenerational use of facilities including educational institutions also shows promise. Anecdotally, long running shared adult and child care centers are reporting children returning as adults to work as staff in the facilities. They do not seem as likely to view older adults through the lens of ageism but rather see them as a population they enjoy. As one 16 year old young man said,

“I began volunteering when I was six months old. My mom would take me on visits to nursing homes and let the older residents hold me. Now I drive myself.”

Given the projected need for caregivers, connecting young to old while they are young could bode well for an aging world. Additionally, the shared use of space appears to hold financial promise as well. While research is again limited, one study found that programs that share space save money in two key areas-facility rental and staffing.^x Limited resources drive “economies of scope” that is those approaches that spread the cost of a service over a larger number of people. A facility or program that is used by multiple generations insures greater reach with fewer resources than a single age construct.

Intergenerational Dialogues have demonstrated positive results. These techniques have been employed in the USA as well as other countries. At West Valley High School in Spokane, Washington, students and coaches met regularly to explore redesign challenges the school was facing. After a year-long effort they agreed on the need for an intergenerational vision team. They concluded the intergenerational dialogue experience transforms participants, supports relationships in community, promotes divergent thinking, demands a balance of power among participants, and transforms society.^{xi}

Governments and NGOs have confirmed the importance of intergenerational connections. The European Union has declared 2012 the European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity. The goal is to not waste the potential of age or youth. A part

of the EU strategy for youth involves investments and empowerment to promote youth volunteer work to encourage dialogues and intergenerational solidarity.

Europe is host to a collaborative network working together to support Intergenerational Learning (IL) across Europe which they believe is a way that people of all ages can learn together. IL is an important part of Lifelong Learning, where the generations work together to gain skills, values and knowledge. It has been suggested that IL is a process of addressing some of the significant demographic changes in society and as a way of enhancing intergenerational solidarity. They have created a 'European Map of Intergenerational Learning' (EMIL) which provides a general overview of the role and status of IL by developing a more sustainable method for collecting, exchanging, and distributing ideas and resources in the field. Representing numerous European organizations, from over 25 European countries, the goal is to collectively have the ability to influence the intergenerational practice debate.^{xii}

In Singapore, the Council of the Third Age hosts an annual intergenerational bonding contest to encourage organizations to develop intergenerational bonding opportunities. The national contest is focused on family relations and has recognized programs that range from family cooking contests to outdoor adventures.

Still polls conducted in the EU and USA have shown people do not believe their governments are doing enough to support connections across generations. A 2010 study conducted by Harris Interactive reported the large majority (78%) of people in the United States want their policymakers to facilitate intergenerational interaction, however a disturbingly low number (61%) said they interact regularly with members of other generations.^{xiii}

Some governments are trying to encourage interaction between generations. For more than ten years, Pamela Smith has championed intergenerational practices which positioned San Diego County as an incubator for innovative programs. As the director of the San Diego Area Agency on Aging, the Human Services Agency's Aging and Independence Services, Ms. Smith has led the formation of many partnerships with community-based programs leading to the creation of nationally recognized programs that have served large numbers of youth and older adults. Under her leadership, an intergenerational coordinator position was created to support the development of intergenerational programs in the county. She undertook the complex development of two unique intergenerational programs; San Pasqual Academy Neighbors, which houses older adults in homes co-located with group housing for foster youth, and Seniors on Broadway, a senior apartment building that opened on the grounds of a charter school. The county also provided seed grants for 30 start-up intergenerational programs and developed a country wide directory of programs. The county has hosted a number of intergenerational

dialogues most notably following the attacks on September 11th. Dialogues were conducted between retired members of the military and high school students and helped provide context for the young people many of whom had never lived through events such as they experienced in 2001.

Roles of Social Institutions

Communities

Communities and the social institutions found within them offer a key venue for encouraging dialogue and mutual understanding across generations. Magic Me is the largest intergenerational arts program in the United Kingdom. It provides an outstanding example of intergenerational programming that bridges cultural as well as age divides through the arts and dialogue. For 21 years the organization and its founder, Susan Langford, have been committed to improving human lives by enabling people to do more, feel better and live longer. They understand the importance of preparing members of each generation carefully before they participate in intergenerational discussions and programs. One project takes place at the Mulberry School for Girls where 98% of the girls are Bangladeshi in an older, white neighborhood. For four months, women ages 14 to 80 years explore topics such as utopia, protests and beauty. The project's aims and objectives are:

- To extend the boundaries of the participants' learning by working intergenerationally.
- Opportunities to build on existing skills and to learn new ones.
- Contribute to an increased quality of life by building relationships across the community.

For 16 years, the project has proven to be effective. As one young participant said “This project really changed my view of older people. I loved the freedom it gave us to be creative.”^{xiv}

When committing to become an intergenerational community, the city of Falcon Heights Minnesota benefited by working with Dr. James Gambone, intergenerational proponent and author of the 2002 book, *Together for Tomorrow*. Mayor Sue Gehrz and the city council made intergenerational interaction a high priority. The mayor gathered a diverse group of eighty-seven people from the ages of 12-88 to participate in a dialogue in response to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The group, representing all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities, developed 126 action steps to improve safety in the community and prepare for future acts of terrorism and naturally occurring disasters like

tornadoes and hurricanes. The city created the Intergenerational Commission on Homeland Security. This group laid the foundation for the Neighborhood Commission now one of four permanent Commissions or advisory groups that help to guide city government in Falcon Heights. Every effort is made to incorporate the voices and concerns of all generations into policy decisions that are made by the mayor. This is done in part by creating formal structures within city government that facilitate communication and decision-making by all generations. Intergenerational participation is encouraged in all Falcon Heights' activities and programs as well as in private events held in public spaces. Specifically, the city requires that: intergenerational interaction is a public policy goal of the City Council; policy proposals must incorporate the ideas and concerns of multiple generations; there is intergenerational participation on city advisory boards; and use of city facilities is free to intergenerational groups.

The Non-Profit Center in Milwaukee Wisconsin sponsored an intergenerational dialogue in 2008 to address growing concerns about racial divisions. A steering committee resulted with the charge to work to enact recommendations such as increased opportunities for social interaction and planned intergenerational dialogues.

The Somali Initiative for Dialogue and Democracy in London convened an intergenerational dialogue in August of 2010 entitled "Peace Begins at Home" amid growing concern that an intergenerational divide was causing conflict, break up and division within families. They concluded that dialogue begins in the home and is important to keeping young and old united. One senior participant said "What has happened today is something brilliant for the Somali community. It is a young person who has thought of the concept of this workshop and young people have important perspectives which we would never have heard before a workshop like this." ^{xv}

Virtual communities can also support intergenerational dialogue and understanding. One Facebook group, Intergenerational Voices, exists to connect baby boomers with millennials for on line dialogue. It has 95 members. UNESCO established a Facebook group entitled Global Intergenerational Human Rights Forum which boasts 405 members and is designed to continue dialogue and exchange ideas.

Finally in April 2010, Leeds City Council in the UK launched 'Bringing Generations Together: Leeds' Intergenerational Approach' and released a document by the same name. Their stated hope is that the document will raise the profile of the effectiveness of intergenerational approaches, providing examples that identify how intergenerational practice can meet key existing objectives, targets and priorities for both local and national, and highlight the benefits of intergenerational work across Leeds.

Educational Institutions

Educational institutions and advocates of lifelong learning have an important role to play in connecting generations and providing opportunities for dialogue among generations. In Europe, Cyprus' Ministry of Education and Culture supports a national program that facilitates older adults returning to primary and secondary schools. The young students learn about the aging process and benefit by having older people as students alongside them in their classrooms. These elders provide personal accounts of what life was like in earlier decades and share stories that make history come alive.^{xvi} In the USA, state and local education policies have broadened to encourage older adults to continue their education and keep their minds active. The state of Kentucky, for example, allows anyone over the age of 65 to audit classes at no cost at state colleges and universities. Several universities have opened their campuses or nearby locations for the development of senior housing. Older adults are invited to join campus life and take classes for free or low tuition.

Educational facilities themselves can be designed and planned to encourage intergenerational exchange. The city of Swampscott, Massachusetts faced a serious financial decision. Two of the community's assets, both about one hundred years old, needed to be replaced. Would the town council chose to build a new high school or would they lean towards their older citizens and replace the senior center? With strong leadership, creativity and much dialogue, the city decided to combine the two in to an intergenerational shared site and built the Swampscott High School and Senior Center. The resulting "green" building is larger and has more amenities than a single age focused facility would have encompassed. As the programs mature, the informal interactions between generations are enhanced by planned, intentional opportunities. For example when filming a history of the high school, the students interviewed seniors who had gone to the school in its early years. When the library was threatened with closure two days a week because of a budget shortage, the older adults stepped up, received training and organized themselves to keep staff the library and keep it open.

In 2008 Black Hill University in Spearfish, South Dakota held an intergenerational dialogue with the intent to make the university more intergenerationally friendly. Twenty-four 18 to 80 year olds participated and at the end made recommendations including conducting additional dialogues, establishing an oral history program, encouraging groups of young and old to attend college events together and holding an intergenerational dance.

Older adults in educational institutions can make a difference as illustrated by the following two examples. First, the Swedish Granddad Program has grown from 2002 to 2010 to include 1000 granddads that work full time in the schools and receive a salary. The program has a national association as well as regional associations. The older adults

report they continue to learn and feel needed. Young people are found to be on better behavior and value their interactions with the granddads.

The second is a national program in the USA, Experience Corps, which engages people over 55 in improving early reading and literacy skills. The program has recruited over 2,000 members to tutor and mentor elementary school students, help teachers in the classroom, and lead after-school enrichment activities. Research conducted by Washington University in St. Louis and Johns Hopkins University shows that Experience Corps boosts student academic performance, helps schools and youth-serving organizations become more successful, and enhances the well-being of older adults in the process.

Young People

Youth-led efforts can be powerful mechanisms in increasing opportunities to connect across generations, engage in dialogue and build mutual understanding. One example is ManaTEEN, founded by Laura Lockwood in 1994, when she was 12 years old. Bored, she tried to volunteer with a senior meal delivery program in Florida but was told she was too young. She went on to recruit other young people and to develop volunteer programs, many of which are elder serving and involve dialogue. ManaTEEN is now the largest locally based teen volunteer initiative in the USA, boasting thousands of teens who volunteer more than 1.7 million hours of service each year. Pet Awareness for Seniors (PAWS), Home Safety Inspections for Seniors, Adopt a Grandparent, and Nosey Neighbours are all programs that engage young people, ages 8 to 21, in the lives of elders, increasing solidarity across generations.

Partnerships developed between young and old can result in valuable outcomes. The process of planning and creating together may be the most important element of the program. Atlas Senior Center in Chicago Illinois partnered with a local youth advocacy project that targets disadvantaged young people to plan and produce an intergenerational conference in November 2010. A group of young and old worked together for six months to plan the event developing deep connections and new understanding. The conference itself was a success attracting 125 people who engaged in dialogues about intergenerational relationships, youth violence and community strengthening. They participated in a well-received poetry slam and a dance off. The intergenerational conference was so well received the city of Chicago decided to include the event in its annual budget.

Working through social studies, science, economics, philosophy, special education and gifted classes, students in the 9th grade and higher in Dade County Public Schools in

Miami Florida were recruited for in-depth study of the issues surrounding Social Security reform. At the same time, older Americans were invited to participate through Senior Centers, state AARP offices and Area Agencies on Aging. Studying individually and as a group, the multi-aged students learned about the history and current status of Social Security as well as the pros and cons of the various proposals for change. All participants in each community then meet during a one day forum of 100 to 200 people to hear additional expert speakers and have a dialogue. The program demonstrated that students and older adults were very interested in learning about the topic of discussion when they were actively engaged in the conversation.

Public Agenda, in partnership with Generations United and two higher education institutions, successfully conducted intergenerational dialogues about Social Security, health care, and other issues relating to America's fiscal future in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania in early April 2009. Each half-day session brought together 40-50 college-age and older Americans for a four hour dialogue. The participants rated the dialogues highly. One student said "We can't have two generations put up against each other; we need to promote generations working together."

Changing Family Structure

In the US, the number of grandparent and other relative raising children households has increased. More than 6.7 million children live in families headed by grandparents or other relatives, and 2.5 million grandparents report that they are responsible for their grandchildren living with them.^{xvii}

The reasons for the increase are as varied as the families themselves but include substance abuse, military deployment, poverty, death of a parent and economic necessity. Grandparents and other relatives raising children, also known as grandfamilies, play an invaluable role helping to raise stronger children the second or even third time around. As the Senegalese proverb says "The things that grandmothers can see while sitting on the ground, younger people cannot see even if they climb to the top of a tree."

Multigenerational households have also seen a sharp increase. While reasons cited above may also play a role in the formation of these families, more recently in the USA the economic downturn, housing bubble burst and high unemployment have exacerbated the numbers. Families that live under one roof may do so temporarily or permanently. Sharing resources provides a bigger pool for all either to support household expenses or enhance savings. While the financial benefits may be motivating for some, others decide to co-locate because it helps address caregiving across the generations. Family members benefit from oral history, storytelling, cultural transmission and a sense of purpose in their lives.

Workplace Opportunities

As our world ages, the opportunities for younger and older workers condense. Young people seek to enter the workforce and many older people seek to remain. In the USA, there is broad recognition that there are now four generations in the workplace. Much effort has been pinpointed on identifying the differences between generations at work and recognizing their diversity. Attention to multigenerational workplaces abounds but little focus has been given to intergenerational workplaces, that is how to capitalize on the strengths of different generations and maximize their ability to work across generational lines. The MetLife Mature Market Institute took the first step when they created a Tool Kit for Engaging the 21st Century Multi-Generational Workforce. Included was a workbook with an assessment tool and activities to encourage working “inter” rather than “multi” generationally.^{xviii}

Summary

Opportunities for people of different generations to mix and mingle have decreased. Approaching our communities, educational institutions and policy making with a holistic intergenerational lens can encourage dialogue and mutual understanding across generations. In an aging society, engaging generations in each other’s lives will increase social cohesion, understanding and cooperation. Each sector has a vital role in providing the venues and mechanisms to encourage generations coming together as a family, not a fight, as a community not a competition.

Policy Recommendations

Leaders and policymakers will better serve their constituencies by viewing policies and decisions through an intergenerational interdependency lens to promote and enhance ways in which people of all generations can live, work and play together, depending on and supporting each other. Intergenerational dialogues play an important role among initiatives that promote intergenerational understanding, reciprocity and interdependence which ultimately results in a more mutually respectful population. The following specific recommendations are put forward for discussion and review.

- **A Conference on the Generations** championed by governments at all levels calling for advocates and leaders across the ages to come together to jointly plan coordinated policies and programs to support their country’s ability to capitalize on its greatest asset, people of all ages. This could begin with a one day invitational meeting with the aim of using intergenerational dialogue to address one narrow topic of current interest.

- **Intergenerational Councils** formed by neighborhoods, local governing bodies and school boards could provide a platform for dialogue and input among and between all generations on an ongoing basis.
- **Secretary/Minister** level position could be created with titles such as Secretary for Intergenerational Interdependence or Minister for All Generations or Ambassador for Intergenerational Understanding charged with reviewing country wide policy to ensure people of all generations are viewed and engaged as resources and have opportunities to fully participate in society and that family life is protected.
- **Countrywide Intergenerational Centers or Networks** such as the Centre for Intergenerational Practice in the United Kingdom or Generations United or The Intergenerational Center at Temple University both in the USA. The UK's centre aims to support those seeking to develop more cohesive communities by promoting intergenerational practice as an effective mechanism to improve the understanding and relationships between people of different generations and cultures. Generations United is focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs and public policies while acting as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration while celebrating the richness of each generation. Temple's Center is focuses on strengthening communities by bringing generations together to address critical concerns and creating opportunities for lifelong civic engagement.
- **Gross Generational Interdependence Product = GGIP** or Generational Impact Statements would create a set of measures and provide a framework for releasing a regularly scheduled report on the state of intergenerational understanding and interdependence.
- **Intergenerational Principles** for policy makers and other leaders to help create a framework for reviewing potential public policies and for use in other decision making recognizing how different generations can and should be engaged as resources to each other.
- **Year of Intergenerational Solidarity** such as the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity planned by the European Union.
- **Work Place Policies** that promote flexibility across the working life to allow people to enter and exit the workforce to further enhance education and skills, caregiving and retirement. Job sharing, time banks, up and down mentoring and intergenerational project teams are among the strategies that can be employed to increase engagement and flexibility.

- **Shared use of facilities and space** promotes the opportunity for formal and informal dialogue across generations. Encourage new development or retrofitting of existing buildings and outdoor space that is friendly and accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Encourage educational institutions to be available to people of all generations whether in the classroom or by building senior housing in close proximity on school grounds.
- **Social insurance programs**, such retirement, disability, and survivors, should be interwoven so the value to all generations is evident and therefore, more likely to be protected and strengthened.
- **United Nations and NGO** coordinated effort between ageing and youth divisions including conducting a Year for All Ages. Encourage intergenerational planning teams and promote intergenerational dialogue to encourage social inclusion when addressing issues of global significance.
- **Issue public statements** that clearly state that intergenerational relationship take place within the family but also within the larger community and world. Intergenerational dialogue and mutual understanding are the responsibility of every citizen.

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