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The changing patterns of Intergenerational Relations in South Africa

Introduction

An intergenerational “contract” has existed between generations from time immemorial. This contract is usually in a form of reciprocal solidarity. Solidarity manifests itself when “one generation uses its vantage position of being outside a particular generation to be of assistance to a generation in need” (Biggs 2007). Unfortunately, major economic, cultural, political and demographic changes have had a negative impact on the reciprocal relations between generations in many parts of the world (United Nations 2003). This disruption particularly in Africa can be attributed to a number of issues. These may include the rising levels of youth unemployment, youth morbidity and mortality, migration and widening social distances between generations.

In line with the trend in Africa, the contemporary South African society is characterised by high generational disjuncture. Generational disjuncture refers to the level of disconnection between generations. Two aspects of the intergenerational disjuncture are discussed in this paper, namely

(i) physical distance that has its roots in the historical experiences of the country as a racially divided society and (ii) social distance that is in large measure developed from past and current socio-economic policies.

Intergenerational disjuncture is especially acute in South Africa. Like many other social aspects, intergenerational relations in contemporary South Africa are related to its Apartheid past, which was characterised by social and political segregation for the greater part of the 20th century. The Apartheid system dictated where people were allowed to stay and work. An important feature of the Apartheid state was the separation of South Africa into mainland “white” city scrapers of South Africa and tribal homelands, which were ostensibly black African. “Able bodied” young men left the homelands and sought employment in the cities, where they were not allowed to stay with their families. Although significant changes have taken place in the last sixteen years since the birth of constitutional democracy in 1994, the legacy of the Apartheid system is nevertheless still experienced in the current state of intergenerational relations in contemporary South Africa.

South Africa is also in the mist of major demographic changes which are driven by the decline in the rate of childbearing and the rise in the rate of morbidity and mortality of young adults mainly as a result of the AIDS pandemic.

Wide physical distance between generations is evidenced by the low rate of co-residence between fathers and their children. The existence of social distance is a manifestation of different epochs within which different generations grew up. The situation is exasperated by the increase in the proportion of young people many of whom cannot be absorbed by the economy. As a result, the emerging pattern of wealth flow between generations is not conducive to wealth creation, and nation building which are so needed by a society that has suffered oppression over a long period. Nation building is “the social process of transforming an underdeveloped, poor and divided society into a community with equal opportunities and economic viability” (Vorster, 2005). Wealth accumulation through co-operation between generations can play a big role in societies that are struggling with a project of nation building like South Africa.

Physical distance between generations

Wide social and physical distances between generations that characterise contemporary South Africa create conditions that are conducive to generational disjuncture. Physical distance relates largely to occupational commitments of parents. For the greater part of the 20th century, a culture of labour migration has prevailed among black South Africans especially. Most notably, the gold mines of Johannesburg attracted large numbers of young black men from around the country. During this period, many black children have had to grow up with absent fathers.

Even now, physical distance between fathers and children is quite common. About 50% of children growing up in South Africa did not stay in the same household as their fathers for the greater part of their childhood years (Richter et al 2010). A major factor is the wide prevalence of non-marital childbearing in South Africa. During the Apartheid era, the enforced separation of men from their families resulted in weak conjugal bonds, resulting in many children being born outside stable sexual unions. In addition, norms governing responsible paternity were not enforced in the urban industrial locations. As a result, many men in these areas did not associate fathering a child with full commitment to parental responsibility. Children fathered outside a formal marriage were hardly regarded by many men as their primary social and financial responsibility. Secondly, in some communities, men are required to pay “damage fees”, a traditional requirement for men to have access to their children that they fathered out of wedlock. This is a major barrier for many men, especially poor young fathers (Swartz et al 2009). Another factor which contributes to the absence of fathers in the lives of their children is a high male mortality rate in the region, shown by the fact that in the last South African census, which was conducted in 2001, by the age 60, there were 80 males to every 100 females among people of African descent in South Africa. Thus many children growing up do not benefit materially and socially from their biological fathers, something that might deprive them of lifetime opportunities that may otherwise have been available. In some households, where both mother and father work eight-to-five jobs, children are typically attended to by domestic helpers.

In these households, social contact between parent and child is typically minimal. Physical distance in such cases are delimited by time.

Social Distance between generations

Social distance is “the grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy that characterise personal and social relations” (Karayali 2001). The notion of social distance is traditionally used to describe the distance between different groups in society, such as social class, gender, race and ethnicity. This concept is appropriate to describe what is happening in African communities and of special interest in this paper, within families, due to rapid socio-political changes in many African societies. Social distance between children and parents may be a result of vast difference in educational status between generations. In South Africa specifically, as a result of parents who have grown up in a closed Apartheid society who are parenting children who are growing up in a liberal post-Apartheid society, a wide social distance between generations is common. Social distance has resulted in a growing gap between the younger and older generation (Bohman, et al. 2008). For instance, in preparing children for the role expected of them once they are grown up, they might be assigned gendered household chores. Thus, young girls within a family are committed to domestic chores of house-keeping and caring for younger siblings. Fulfilling these household chores can be time-consuming, thus significantly compromising time spent on school work. This is likely to have a cumulatively negative impact on the academic performance of such girls.

The same experience is true for young boys in rural South Africa who are groomed to become breadwinners. For these boys, school attendance is sporadically interrupted by goat, sheep and cattle-herding and as well as other homely responsibilities. In this case, a marked decline in academic performance can be attributed to differences of interest between generations. This, in turn, has a hindering effect on a variety of opportunities in the later stages of life. Thus, responsibilities and values in the parent generation can work together to undermine human potential for girls and boys in the subsequent generation. On the other hand, social distance can manifest in the case of children socialized in a culture of “Model C” schools (a popular term for multiracial schools in South Africa). Such children are likely to experience difficulty relating to adults who grew up within the Apartheid education system. Social distance also develops between generations when a parent and child are educated in systems that emphasize different values. Language barriers between generations are also common in South Africa, with children being unable to communicate fluently in the vernacular of their parents. This is especially the case for those children who attended multiracial schools who were taught in a second language. The implication here is that language can be a factor in creating such differences.

Social distance has a dire consequence on the ability of generations to support each other materially. According to Clay and Van der Haar (1993), children’s ability to support their

parents may depend on the feelings of loyalty they hold for their parents. As explained above, intergenerational relationship can be weakened by educational difference between generations, and by the influence of mass media especially digital communication (Nuget, in Clay and Vander Haar (1993). Mainly due to the fact that many older persons cannot cope with the rapid pace of advancement in digital communication, it remains an age segregated activity. As a result, fear is often expressed by the aged with regard to the societal transition under way in South Africa which has tended to give them less influence, less control and less respect while heaping more care for family members than previous generations were responsible for (Bohman et al., 2008:7). Thus, older people might not be well placed to undertake the job that society has been placed on their shoulders.

The impact of the changing population structure on generational relations

Demographic changes generally have a significant impact on intergenerational relations in society. It is commonly noted that the increase in the expectation of life and the drastic decline of the rate of child bearing has put pressure on intergenerational support of older persons in more developed countries. Less documented is the impact of the demographic transition happening in less developed countries have on intergenerational relations. Demographic transition is a once off period in society when the proportion of the population in the working age group is particularly prominent. For instance the economic upsurge in the Asian region is partly attributed to economic benefit accrued from demographic transition. During transition, the proportion of young people increases significantly compared to other age groups because of the historically high fertility and mortality rates, which has been followed by a sustained decline in fertility. This results in what is generally called the 'youth bulge'. The youth bulge has, in some parts of the world, been translated to a demographic dividend, which is the economic advantage that has been accrued by members of all generations. In countries where the demographic dividend has benefited the general population, young adults enter the labour market and in the process, increase the tax base of the nation at large. At the same time costs to the state to take care of children declines because of the declining proportion of population at older and young ages, which are dependant ages. Within households, benefit is derived from having more members earning an income with which to support fewer children. A further advantage is that this group of young people is historically the healthiest segment of society and in all likelihood the first generation that would have benefited from wide coverage of a comprehensive education system. Society would benefit greatly from job creation and productivity derived from this segment of society.

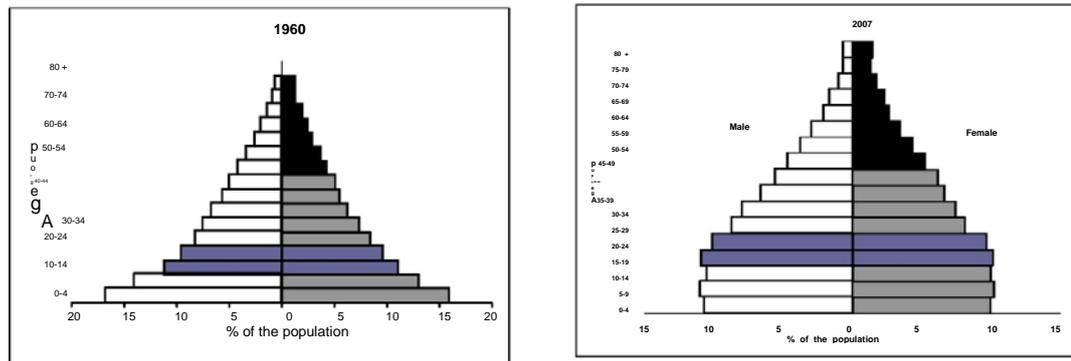


Figure 1 The South African Population Pyramid, 1960, 2007

Some African countries, including South Africa, are well advanced in their demographic transition. In Africa today, however, due to the burden of disease, particularly HIV/AIDS, unemployment and experimentation with drugs and alcohol, many young adults continue to be a burden of parents in their childhood households. On the other hand, population ageing in South Africa has been accompanied by declining sex ratios, whereby a larger proportion of females are reaching old age than males. This has caused a higher proportion of elderly households to be headed by women who have not traditionally been the breadwinners of African families. This means that those with perennially lower incomes have only gained more responsibilities with their meagre resources. Thus, because of the failure by society to transmit cutting edge hard and soft skills, young people remain dependent on meagre resources provided for by the previous generation. The demographic dividend, which is the term used to explain the economic advantage accrued to the entire society due to the increase in the proportion of young people in society, has thus far not been realised.

Intergenerational co-residence

A number of recent studies situate generational issues in the context of socio-political change, high levels of unemployment and poverty, and the incidence of HIV/AIDS amongst South Africans. There is an emerging literature which emphasises the role of grandparents in the nurturing and the grooming of the young. Studies conducted in South Africa make two points that are important for this debate on intergenerational relations. Firstly and historically, grandparents especially in African communities consider it a duty and an honour to care for their grandchildren. In fact in the Apartheid past, grandparents took care of their grandchildren; whilst the latter's biological parents were working in the cities (Pinnock 1984, Makiwane et al. 2004). Secondly, in the cities, parents go to work during the day leaving children behind in the care of their grandparents. In the urban areas the imposition of the Group Areas Act (a law which separated residential areas according to race during Apartheid) has separated families and weakened the extended family since the 1960's. In a response the communities in many townships have witnessed the emergence of gangs who have become a socially disruptive force.

Gangs have contributed to the overall high crime situation in South Africa (Kinnes 2000). Thus, the continuous positive role played by families in guiding younger generations has been replaced by their role of providing cover during the times of crises. Gangs are typically generational groups operating outside the accepted norms set by the previous generations, formed in order for individuals to make headway in life. These alternative social structures, like gangs have replaced the extended family system which historically was crucial for the socialisation of the youth (Pinnock, 1984). This creates perennial generational conflicts that retard progress in wealth accumulation.

Two main roles of intergenerational solidarity are in care giving and economic support that is given by one generation to another. To receive care and be given economic support is crucial to individuals from the time of infancy until one reaches adult years as well as when one is in twilight years. It is also crucial during times of crises, when one is sick or is in financial trouble.

Co-residence between generations during crucial stages of life cycle is an important indicator of the level of support between generations.

The table below shows the level of co-residence between generations.

Table 1 Percentages of Co-residence by age groups in South Africa

Household Type	Age Groups					
	Whites			Blacks		
	18-34	35-59	60+	18-34	35-59	60+
One generational households	54.8	35.6	78.3	59.9	28.7	18.9
Two generational households	43.0	59.0	15.3	37.7	46.1	14.8
Three generational households	1.7	4.2	4.3	1.2	20.4	41.2
Skipped generational households	0.1	0.5	1.9	0.6	3.4	24.0

Data sourced from Statistics, South Africa, 2007

The period during which young people stay with their parents vary considerable. About 10% of children leave their parental households before the end of their childhood years, to stay with foster parents, who are likely to be better off financially than their parents (Status of the Youth Survey data, 2003). Some of them might end up being street children¹. The vast majority leave their parental households between the late teens and early twenties. Yet about 35% of the children remain in parental households well beyond their thirties.

Table 2. The Relationship to Head of Young People in South African Households, 2007.

Youth Are:	Age group		
	15-19	20-24	All (15-24)
Head or acting head of household	2.9	11.5	7.1
Husband/wife or partner	0.7	5.6	3.1
Biological son or daughter	59.0	50.2	54.7
Adopted son or daughter	1.6	1.3	1.5
Step child	1.2	0.9	1.1
Brother or sister	5.5	7.2	6.3
Grand/great grand child	18.5	9.5	14.1
Son/daughter in-law	0.9	2.0	1.4
Other relative	8.9	9.7	8.3
Non-related person	0.9	2.1	1.5

It has been noticed that children who become successful in their careers leave parental households earlier, while the less successful remain behind to be a burden to their ageing parents (Makiwane 2010). As early non-marital childbearing is common in South Africa, many of the women who remain in parental households are likely to bear children, thus creating two generations of dependents. Data obtained from the South African 1996 census which was analysed by Rama and Richter (2007) indicates that child dependency ratio is high among low income households. Households headed by pensioners are most likely to fall under this category. The study revealed that most pensioners live in three generational households, often female-headed, having responsibility over unmarried children and grandchildren and possibly even other relatives. Under normal circumstances, the aged in African culture regard the younger generation as securing the future of the household. But in the face of unemployment and HIV/AIDS the social roles have been reversed. The elderly are responsible for raising children and grandchildren and also responsible for care giving and financial support later in life. This is captured by this statement from one elderly woman: “I am responsible for the children and grandchildren...instead of getting help from them. They should look after me being an old

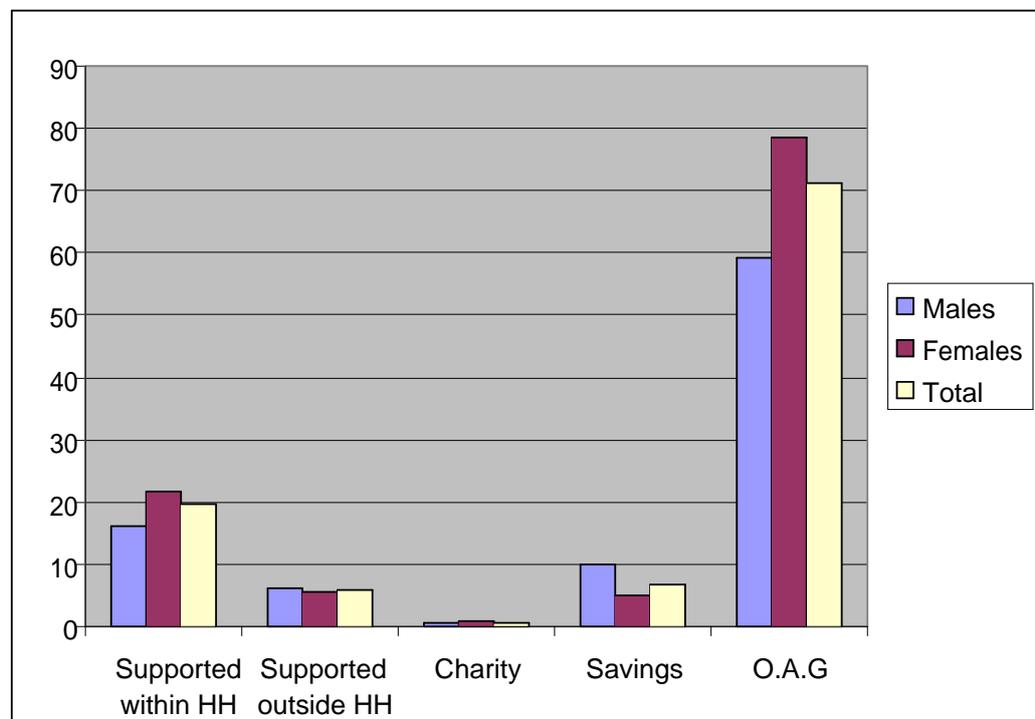
¹ Street children live in the street, and are deprived of family care and protection

lady.” (Bohman et al., 2008:5). From the perspective of the elderly their relations with the younger generational should be reciprocal, grandchildren and children should be able to “payback.”

Flow of Economic Wealth between generations

A simplistic analysis of wealth flow between generations was stated by Caldwell in 1976. Caldwell posited two wealth flow regimes, one which is found in “primitive” and “traditional” societies, where the wealth flow moves upwards from younger to older generations, a contrasting wealth flow regime is found in developed societies where the net flow of wealth moves from the older to younger generations. Thus, Caldwell concluded, that parents in Less Developed societies have vested in giving birth to as many children as biologically possible. The South African context is an example where such simplistic analysis could not have been far from reality. All indications are that mutual beneficence has always existed in many developing societies. Thus, as shown in the table below, few older persons survive on the support they get from their children.

Figure 2 The distribution of the main source of income received by to older persons (60 years or above) in South Africa, by Gender



Data Source: National Community Survey, Statistics South Africa, 2007

OAG – State non contributory old age grant

HH - Household

A common trend in developed countries is that wealth flows from parents to children when children are young. This is followed by a long lull period when children are working and little wealth is shared between generations. Eventually this is followed by a windfall period when there is a flow from parents to children in the form of inheritances. This is usually possible if the younger generation is able to acquire sufficient skills early in their youth through the guidance of their parents, and are able to live an independent life once they reach adulthood. This model is common among societies where there has been fairly stable economic growth over two or more generations. In developing countries, wealth flows change over time. Initially, wealth flows from parents to children when they are young. This is generally followed by a period of mutual beneficitation when children have reached adulthood, with children sending regular remittances and parents assisting children during the time of social and economic distress. This model is possible if there are uninterrupted relationships between generations, something that is being challenged by rapid socio-demographic changes that are occurring throughout the world.

In addition to economic benefit of wealth sharing between generations, remittances play a big role in connecting the middle that have moved in search of work with both parents and children. Due to economic volatility that is a common feature of many developing countries many working migrants constantly lose jobs and may consequently lose their connection with the rest of their family. The start-stop working conditions of young people in the developing world are not conducive to creating lasting family relationships.

Over decades, many rural households in South Africa were sustained by remittances from the meagre salaries of mineworkers. This continued until recently, when many mineworkers were retrenched en masse from the mines. The lack of vibrant economies in rural areas of South Africa has had a negative impact on the economic flows from the middle generation. Even among young people who are employed, there is generally low rate of remitting compared to many developing societies. It has been observed, that as a general rule, areas with low economic activity are less likely to attract remittances from the middle generation that has left the area (Kaufman 1997). This is related to the fact that remittances are also a form of diversification of investments by young adults who have left their underdeveloped areas. Thus, areas with vibrant economies are more likely to attract remittances than areas where such remittances will mainly be used for consumption.

Policy options

South Africa, like many countries in the world has policies that support families, which include tax exemptions for children, and child support is tax deductible. Non-contributory old age pension and the child support grants, which target poor families, play a big role in enabling generations to support each other. In addition to a number of laws pertaining to family welfare, a draft family policy is in place that seeks to strengthen South African families and maintain their well-being through specific programmes and actions.

Nevertheless, it is only recently that the government has initiated a national dialogue with the aim of drafting a national framework to build intergenerational solidarity. Many of these strategies are being discussed by government and civil society.

New programmes to rebuild sound intergenerational relations are needed in order to create conditions for wealth creation, and I list some preliminary policy options arising from this preceding discussion.

(i) Technology and media that encourages better intergenerational relations

The first policy option is to encourage the support role of the medial and digital technology. It is common understanding that new technological innovations have played a divisive role among generations. This is due to the fact that young people, who were born during digital age, leave behind other generations who are digital “migrants”. New attempts are envisaged that would make digital communication to be more user-friendly to the older generation, and thus enable them to communicate and transfer knowledge and skills to the younger generations. In addition, the media should encourage a positive and integrative role between members of different generations. This could be done by harnessing the power of mass and multi-media through telling stories that reflect current state of intergenerational relations. Special attention should be made to promote a positive image of fatherhood.

(ii) Creation of Intergenerational Investment schemes

Traditionally, subsistence farming served as a common interest between generations. The middle generation would send regular support for investment in the sector while the older generation would be custodian of the enterprise. This fostered continuous social contact while different generation ripped benefit of the enterprise. With the decline of subsistence farming in South Africa, new innovative ways are needed for common wealth accumulation between generations.

(iii) Support for voluntary and flexible economic and social participation retired persons

The government can facilitate participation by a number of considered incentives to government and other private sector organizations that accommodate flexible participation of older persons. This would enhance skills and knowledge transfer across generations. Multipurpose centres where old people can receive health care, entertainment but also where they in turn can provide a service to children and youth. People of different generations must share physical environment and be encouraged to engage in formal and informal interactions.

(iv) School based programmes

Grandparents and parents should be encouraged to actively participate in the classrooms. They might be tasked to tell or read stories to learners. In addition, pupils might be tasked to do school assignments that encourage young people to interact with older persons on an ongoing basis. National competitions could be tasked to analyze intergenerational relations (either within

family, community, nationally or continentally) and to find constructive solutions. National media will be sought to broadcast some of the most creative interventions.

(v) Research Programmes

More resources should be invested into research programmes that are related to intergenerational relations.

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