Focus on intergenerational solidarity

Introduction

2012 is the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. Intergenerational solidarity is based on promoting exchanges between generations while active ageing is about maintaining good health. This year promotes the valuable contribution that older people make to society, whether at work, at home or in the community. It challenges the stereotypical image of people over 65 being dependent on the state or a burden on society.

This article, part of the monthly “Focus on” series from CARDI, concentrates on the solidarity between generations aspect of the European Year 2012. It examines the contribution made by older people
to society and across generations and also considers whether or not intergenerational solidarity works both ways in light of age discrimination and other concerns.

**Key findings**

- Myths have developed about older people and ageing which are barriers to intergenerational solidarity – particularly in the areas of jobs, care, taxation and family support. Combating these myths is an important aspect of the European Year 2012.

- Across the EU, 69% of people believe that young and old generations do not generally agree on what is best for society. 56% of people feel that as people work for longer, fewer jobs will be available for younger generations (Eurobarometer, 2009).

- 11% of all carers in ROI are over the age of 65. In NI, the over 55 age group accounts for 30% of all carers. One estimate from NI suggest unpaid care saves the economy £4.4bn each year (Carers UK, 2011).

- In the ROI 24% of older households have given financial or material resources worth €5,000 or more to their children in the last ten years.

- In 21 EU member states, the view is that there are not enough opportunities for older and younger people to meet and work together, via associations or local community initiatives (Eurobarometer, 2009).

**Population data**

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the Northern Ireland (NI) population by age group. Men over 65 currently account for 12.7% of the total male population while women over 65 currently account for 16.2% of the total female population. Over 65s account for 14.5% of the total population (NISRA, 2011). However, this is expected to rise almost one quarter (24%) by 2041 (CARDI, 2010).
The rise in NI’s population of pensionable age will raise the dependency ratio from 26.4% to 33.7% (CARDI, 2010). However, 8.6% of men over the age of 60 and 5.9% of women are in employment (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2011). With the rise in the state pension age across the UK, people will be remaining in work for longer and thus paying taxes and social welfare contributions later in their lives.

Figure 2 shows a similar breakdown of the Republic of Ireland (ROI) population by age group. The over 65s make up a smaller proportion of the population than in NI. Just under one-tenth (9.8%) of men and 12.3% of women are over 65. There is a similar proportion of people in the 0-14 age group in both ROI and NI, while ROI has more 15-24 year olds and 25-44 year olds¹.

¹ The data from ROI is from the 2006 Census so is significantly older than the NI data. New population information by age group is due to emerge from the 2011 censuses taken in both jurisdictions.
9% of people aged 65 and over in ROI were still at work in 2009. This is an increase from 6.8% in 2004 (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

Attitudes toward intergenerational solidarity

A 2012 survey on active ageing showed that 76% of people in ROI perceive people over the age of 55 in a positive light, compared to an EU average of 61%. In the UK, 68% of respondents perceived the over 55 age group in a positive light (Eurobarometer, 2012).

Nevertheless, there are positive and negative aspects to relations between young and old generations. When asked in 2009, a big majority of Europeans (85%) disagreed that older people are a burden on society, but 69% agreed that young and old people do not easily agree on what is best for society. While 70% disagreed that companies employing mostly young people perform better than others, 56% agreed that as people work until older ages, fewer jobs will be available for older people.

The financial contribution that parents and grandparents make to younger people was considered very important, but a majority of respondents in all member states also thought that the contribution of older people who care for family members or relatives is not sufficiently appreciated in their country. In addition, the majority view in 21 member states was that there were not enough opportunities for older and
younger people to meet and work together, via associations or local community initiatives (Eurobarometer, 2009).

In NI, when asked if older people are treated worse because of their age, 42% of the over 65s answered yes. However, younger people, those in the 18-44 age group, agreed in slightly larger numbers (47%). The younger age group also agreed in larger numbers that the authorities in NI do not do enough for older people – 71% compared to 65% for the over 65s (Ark NI, 2005).

People also have different opinions on what is considered an older person and what is considered a younger person. For example in ROI, when asked at what age one starts to be regarded as “old”, people responded 64.2 years on average. In the UK, this was 61.9 years. The country with the lowest age people are considered old at was the Slovak Republic at 57.7 while the highest was the Netherlands at 70.4 (Eurobarometer, 2012).

**Age discrimination and intergenerational solidarity**

Encouraging active ageing and a contribution to communities and society from the older population is just one part of intergenerational solidarity. It is also important that all generations work to end age discrimination, both in the workplace and in other aspects of life. This is particularly true as older people remain working for longer.

According to the Eurobarometer survey on active ageing, 46% of people in ROI would like to continue working after they reach the state pension age. Across the whole of the UK, this figure is 56% (Eurobarometer, 2012). However, this can be a source of controversy as younger people claim they cannot get jobs or progress within an organisation if the older members of staff do not retire. This is not necessarily true if good policy and business practice for older workers is in place. For example, Denmark has 10% higher employment among the over 55s than the EU average, yet youth unemployment is lower than the EU average.

Age discrimination is still a significant problem for older people, which suggests that solidarity between the generations needs to be strengthened. In ROI, 11% of people had witnessed discrimination and 3% had actually experienced discrimination themselves on age grounds when it came to work or looking for work. 11% had witnessed discrimination in the area of health care, 12% in accessing financial services and 7% in access to education or training (Eurobarometer, 2012).

In a survey taken in NI in 2008, 11% of 55-64 year olds and 7% of those aged 65+ said that they had not been treated as well as they might have been by an employer because of their age (ARK NI, 2010).
Myths of intergenerational solidarity

Part of the European Year 2012 is to raise awareness of the contribution that older people make to society, offering a platform for identifying and disseminating information on best practice that maximises this contribution. It is important that the contribution older people provide society and to other generations is more fully recognised.

Several myths have arisen with regard to older people and ageing which have often been propagated by media articles without reference to research and evidence. There are several examples of this below, where views about ageing and older people do not tally with the facts.

**Jobs**

"Why Millennials Can't Start Their Careers And Baby Boomers Can't End Theirs."

The Huffington Post, 8 September 2011

An all-pervading myth regarding older people is that as people stay in their jobs for longer, working past the retirement age, this keeps younger people out of employment. The example of Denmark (above) shows that
it is very possible to have high youth employment at the same time as high employment among older people. A report in ROI in 2010, *Ageing, the Demographic Dividend and Work* (O’Neill, 2010) emphasised how older workers can benefit employers, as they bring a lifetime of experience and expertise to a role.

**Care**

"£500m funding gap leaves elderly care in crisis"
Daily Mirror UK, 30 January 2012

The traditional media image of older people in society is that once the age of 65 is reached, they are in need of care which must be provided by younger people of working age. However, older people are significant providers as well as recipients of care. For example, 11% of all carers in ROI are over the age of 65 while the average age of a carer in ROI is 73 years old (McGee, 2008).

In NI, there has been a progressive increase in the proportion of older people who are carers, with over 30% of the over 55 age group being carers, although care is most often provided by people in the 35-54 age group (ARK NI, 2011). Over one quarter of carers (27%) in NI report that they have a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity even though they provide care for someone else.

**Family support**

"OECD: huge elderly care bill threatens family ties"
Daily Telegraph, 22 May 2011

A major stereotype of older people is that they are a financial burden on their children, requiring significant money contributions to maintain them in retirement and in care settings. However, the opposite is often the case. Data from the Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) in ROI show that older people contribute significantly to younger generations.

Over one third of older adults provide practical household help, including shopping and household chores, to their adult children while nearly half provide care to grandchildren. Nearly one-quarter of older households had given large financial or material gifts (worth €5,000 or more) to their children in the last ten years. In contrast, only 9% of older adults have received financial transfers from their children (The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, 2011).
Volunteering

“Britain’s bill for elderly care ‘to cost a fifth of GDP’ by 2050”
Daily Mail, 23 May 2011

Older people in society are often viewed as inactive and incapable of making a positive contribution. However, older people contribute to the economy through high levels of volunteering. Often volunteering is seen as something which younger generations do to help older people. However, older generations volunteer their time in communities and formal organisations that offer support and help to others.

There is a high rate of contributing to the community through volunteering among older people in NI, with 17% of people aged 65+ in NI being formal volunteers (i.e. through an organisation), while 27% are informal volunteers. In ROI, 15% of people aged 65+ are involved with a formal voluntary activity.

Contribution to tax revenues

“Worried OAPs flood hotlines in tax fiasco”
Irish Herald, 7 January 2012

While the ratio of working people to retired people is becoming a policy challenge with our ageing population, it is not all one-way traffic in terms of working people paying tax to support older generations. Many older people have contributed tax and social insurance contributions all their lives. In addition, with 9% of older people in ROI and 7.3% of people in NI still in employment, the contribution of income tax on earnings made by older people across the island of Ireland is considerable. However, older people also contribute tax through private savings and pension income, capital gains tax and indirectly through VAT on purchases.

Spending power

“Elderly people in NI living in fear of cuts”
BBC News, 20 October 2010

It is often overlooked in negative stereotyping that many people who retire contribute to the economy through spending. While pensioner poverty is a serious policy challenge, not all older people are completely dependent on the state. Some, particularly those with private pension income and other assets, over the age of 65 have significant spending power.

For example in ROI, the average gross equivalised weekly income of the very top quintile was €911.44 in 2009 (Central Statistics Office, 2011). In
NI, the average income of the top quintile was £316 for a single pensioner in 2009 (Department for Social Development, 2009). This spending power contributes both directly and indirectly toward supporting the economy. In the UK, one estimate from 2011 suggested that the value of the “grey pound” has already reached at least £64 billion per annum in net terms (WRVS, 2011).

Policy opportunities

Greater intergenerational solidarity can lead to more cohesive communities. It can also provide learning opportunities for younger generations, through the knowledge and experience of older people, as well as opportunities for older generations to learn new skills from young people, particularly in the field of IT. Enhanced solidarity can also lead to more equal societies, as both younger and older generations are often marginalised in policy decisions. Getting these generations involved in politics, particularly where their rights are concerned is a key strand of developing solidarity (Cunningham, 2011).

Community initiatives

There are many community-based initiatives across the island of Ireland which aim to promote intergenerational solidarity. The Centre for Intergenerational Practice, founded by the Beth Johnson Foundation, supports a network of member organisations and individuals with a commitment to intergenerational practice, including the Linking Generations Northern Ireland programme. Age Action in ROI operates a “Generations Together” programme which aims to create age-friendly communities and reduce the divide between generations. On an EU-wide basis, Age Platform Europe runs an awareness campaign which aims to promote support among politicians for civil society initiatives on intergenerational co-operation.

Conclusion

With the European Year 2012, governments in both NI and ROI are voicing their support for promoting active ageing and solidarity between the generations, creating new opportunities for policy and community initiatives to strengthen ties between young and old in Ireland, North and South. Both the young and old generations should have positive views of each other, defying traditional views and stereotypes held, work together to create more cohesive communities and explore ways of working to improve society through joint initiatives. This is more important than ever when social and economic changes threaten to weaken intergenerational links.
Bibliography


ARK NI. (2010). Attitudes to Age and Ageing in the North of Ireland.


