

Chapter 15.

Intergenerational **RELATIONS**



The importance of maintaining productive and mutually beneficial relations between all generations is the focus of this chapter. Major economic, social, cultural, political and demographic changes have disrupted and redefined traditional family and social structures and intergenerational relationships. Policy adjustments are needed to reflect the new realities, with particular attention given to developing new economic and social opportunities, strengthening patterns of reciprocity and exchange, and maintaining mutual support structures. The sections of this chapter focus on shifts in intergenerational activity at the micro and macro levels, achieving the objectives for intergenerational integration and solidarity set out in international instruments, the transitions occurring in interaction between generations, and the need to renegotiate the “intergenerational contract”. The intergenerational dimensions of poverty are also explored. The conclusion calls for appropriate policy responses that support possibilities for multigenerational contributions to society and the strengthening of integration and interdependence between age groups.

“Solidarity between generations at all levels—in families, communities and nations—is fundamental for the achievement of a society for all ages.”¹

INTRODUCTION

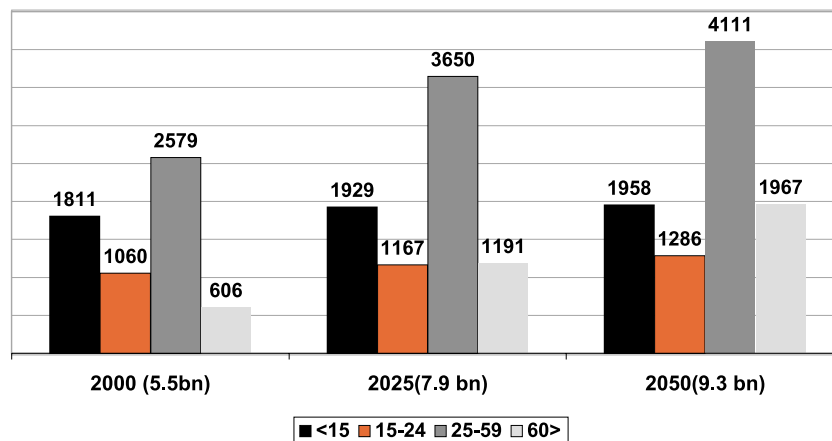
The combined effects of a rapid increase in the ageing population and a decline in birth rates are producing fundamental changes in many societies. Changing expectations are also having a profound impact. Many older people, rejecting the stereotypes of old age, are pursuing more active lives and are receiving greater recognition for their important ongoing contributions to their families and communities. Many younger people are seeking greater responsibility for the important life choices and decisions that must be made. Family and community networks, which are important for providing informal care for their members, are under increasing strain as family ties evolve and economic requirements or incentives lead growing numbers of women—the traditional caregivers in most societies—to move into the workforce. The ability of Governments to respond to changing needs and to provide adequate services in the face of rising costs is being threatened.

By the middle of this century, the old and the young will represent an equal share of the world’s population. Globally, the proportion of those aged 60 years and over is expected to double, rising from 10 to 21 per cent between 2000 and 2050, and the proportion of children will decline by a third, from 30 to 21 per cent. The same trend is expected in developing countries, where the proportion of older persons is expected to rise from 8 to 19 per cent by 2050, while the proportion of children will

fall from 33 to 22 per cent (see figure 15.1).² Regional figures will vary significantly; Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, in particular, are expected to see major shifts in their ageing-to-youth ratios, but Europe will still have the highest rates and Africa the lowest, with almost three people aged 60 years and above for every child under 15 in the former, and almost three children under 15 for every person aged 60 years and over in the latter.³

In developed countries the demographic shift is already having a profound impact on every aspect of society, requiring adjustments in economic and social policies and the societal infrastructure. The demographic transition in developing countries will occur at a much faster rate than it has in developed countries, and in many cases, the necessary infrastructure and policies will not be in place to deal with the consequent developments.

Figure 15.1
Population distribution by age



Source: United Nations, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2002 update, available at <http://www.unpopulation.org>.

It was with these issues in mind that Member States of the United Nations gathered in Madrid in April 2002 to participate in the Second World Assembly on Ageing, where they adopted the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.⁴ The Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging had been adopted at the first World Assembly on Aging, held in 1982.⁵ A comparison of the two documents reveals vastly different approaches to the ageing population. The Vienna Plan espoused a more traditional “welfare” approach to older persons that was not unreasonable considering the era in which it was written—during the heyday of the welfare state in both Western countries and the former Soviet Union, and before the scale and speed of population ageing in developing countries had been fully realized. The Madrid Plan takes a “developmental” approach to the ageing of societies (not just individuals), with emphasis on the mainstreaming of ageing and older persons into policies and planning.

The Madrid approach had its roots in the lead-up to the United Nations International Year of Older Persons in 1999 with the theme “a society for all ages”.⁶ This represented an extension of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development’s

vision of “a society for all”—an inclusive society posited as the aim of social integration. The Summit also coined the term “people-centred development”, stressing the need for the participation of all.⁷ Many saw the Social Summit as a landmark event in that it placed social issues on the global agenda at the highest levels of Government. It also took a first step towards bringing marginalized groups into mainstream development discussions. Intergenerational issues and concepts are incorporated in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, albeit in a small way. These earlier contributions provided the foundations for the Madrid Plan of Action, which is built upon on the “society for all ages” concept and the intergenerational approach to policy.

This chapter represents an attempt to initiate a dialogue that explores the basis of intergenerational solidarity and relationships at both the individual and societal levels and some of the major changes that have occurred in recent history. In advocating the adoption of an intergenerational perspective in policy development as promoted by the Madrid Plan, the chapter examines the intergenerational transmission of poverty. This issue has been selected because many researchers in developing countries are citing poverty as the foremost structural threat to the traditional mutually supportive role of families, and also because the poor have traditionally been viewed as a monolithic group or statistic. Research being undertaken in this area points to new perspectives on, and a better understanding of, the nature of poverty when an intergenerational analysis is applied.

Intergenerational activity can occur at both the macro and micro levels. Most research, discussion and policies have tended to focus on macro concerns such as financial transfers, in particular public pension issues and long-term care (transfers between generations in the general sense); less attention has been given to the micro-level private sphere of intergenerational services and care (transfers between biological generations). In general, the private sphere of intergenerational relationships is discussed as it relates to the wider macro issue of financial costs to Governments and, in some developed countries, the cost to the younger generation. This is evidenced in a recent report by the Treasury of the Australian Government that considers the different variables affecting budgetary trends and projections against the backdrop of an ageing population. According to the report’s conclusions, “the projections ... suggest that, if policies are not adjusted, the current generation of taxpayers is likely to impose a higher tax burden on the next generation”.⁸ The Australian Treasury focus is on sustaining a healthy government financial position while ensuring that current policies do not compromise the well-being of future generations. Similar studies have been undertaken and are ongoing in some European countries and the United States, and the OECD has conducted research along these lines as well.

Under the first of three priority directions in the recommendations of the Madrid Plan,⁹ intergenerational solidarity is addressed at both the macro and micro levels within the context of such solidarity being one of the basic foundations of society. The Plan acknowledges that changing demographic, economic and social circumstances will necessitate adjustments in macro-level policies relating to the pension, social security, health and long-term care systems in order to sustain economic growth



and development;¹⁰ this process will require a review of existing policies to ensure generational equity as well as efforts to promote the idea of mutual support and solidarity between generations as a key element in social development.

Another issue addressed by the Madrid Plan of Action is the importance of kinship relations. The Plan refers to the fact that close family ties have largely been maintained in the face of major societal change, with all generations providing contributions; it is acknowledged, however, that all sectors of society must work to strengthen those ties¹¹ by promoting dialogue aimed at boosting solidarity and providing for the specific needs of caregivers.¹²

One of the central themes running through the Madrid Plan is “recognition of the crucial importance of families, intergenerational interdependence, solidarity and reciprocity for social development.”¹⁵ The Plan links the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms—including the right to development—to the achievement of “a society for all ages”. Again, reciprocity between the generations is emphasized as key.¹⁴ Time and again at the United Nations, Member States have pointed to the maintenance of intergenerational solidarity as a priority concern when they speak about the situation of older persons, even if the means of achieving this objective have not always been clearly identified. Interestingly, in articles on youth and children, there is a dearth of references to the importance of intergenerational relationships. Member States of the United Nations are similarly silent on the topic when discussing young people, which leads one to suspect that perhaps societies have taken the view that older people need young people more than the young need the old.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL CONTRACT

Intergenerational relationships, and what is referred to as the intergenerational contract, are governed by rules, norms, conventions, practices and biology, with the “contract” being implicit rather than arrived at through individual negotiation. Though perhaps not as common today, it was standard for some cultures in the past to take steps to ensure that power over resources and assets lay with older persons (and invariably with older men, not older women). In many Western countries, the welfare of older persons has become largely a community rather than a family concern; in some countries the conventional role of the family has been minimalized.¹⁵ These examples point to the fact that all societies have different starting points in their perceptions of what constitutes the intergenerational contract, solidarity and relationships, of how formalized those relationships are, and of whether they exist at the macro or micro level of society (or both).

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN TRANSITION

It is generally agreed that there has been a shift in the nature of intergenerational relationships in all societies over the years, and discussions of the reasons for this change have generally focused on two possibilities: (a) that it is the result of changing beliefs and values that have affected the role of the family and the relationships between its members; and (b) that it is the effect of socio-economic transformation that has led to changes in the institutional organization of family life and a change in family relationships.

The extended family structures typical in many developing countries, traditionally the focus of family production, are generally based on weak emotional links between immediate family members and reliance on the wider kinship network. With the decline in family-based production systems, some argue that it is changing beliefs and values that have brought about a shift in attitudes about family and a change in the flow of wealth, with parents investing in children and their education and older persons losing control over the means of production—further contributing to the decline in fertility. Chief among the influences cited is the spread of education and its value as a stepping-stone to wealth, power and wisdom. The migration of younger family members and the consequent independence (and disruption in intergenerational dialogue and interaction) this brings are also cited.

Others argue that demographic transitions are linked not only to changes in values but also to the changing socio-economic environment that affects the family structure and relationships. The residence of older people within the extended family or alone is not an indicator of well-being or the state of intergenerational solidarity, but rather a reflection of the wider social and cultural processes that regulate societies and the place of individuals. Chief among these influences has been the changing role of women and their increased participation in the labour force, apparent in developed countries for some time but now affecting family caregiving in developing countries as well, and there is also the larger issue of the status of women and older women. In terms of family structure, there was once only two or three generations in existence at the same time whereas now there are many more (though the number of cohorts within each generation is smaller), which has led to a blurring of intergenerational boundaries. As a result of these developments, there are many different kinds of families and “social contracts” within societies at the same level of demographic transition.

Many believe that the reasons for the changes in intergenerational relationships lie somewhere between the two possibilities mentioned above, since the development of any generational cohort is based on a combination of multiple variables such as class, gender, values, the State and economics. Many attribute the change in intergenerational relations to industrialization, globalization and economic development; however, while these processes set the conditions for the direction of social policy development, they do not dictate the content of these policies and therefore cannot be the sole determining factors in any “one size fits all” theory. The historical



development and political processes of any given country are also extremely important in shaping policy evolution.¹⁶ For example, the individualistic policy bias in the United States reflects the traditional American values of equality of opportunity, liberty, and “getting ahead” through hard work.¹⁷

As Stephanie Coontz points out, “Changes in... values and behaviours are seldom a result of people suddenly becoming nicer

or meaner, smarter or more irresponsible. They reflect realignments in the way families articulate with larger social, economic, and political institutions, as well as changes in environmental demands on adults and children.”¹⁸

In developed countries, intergenerational relations have traditionally been based on rights and duties linked to the status of age and sex, with social policies shaping patterns of dependence and interdependence between age groups. However, demographic, social and economic changes are leading to a rethinking of relations and expectations. Gunhild Hagestad warns that the modern, age-segregated lifestyle, reflected in both living arrangements and production/education settings, “may breed ageism and rob all age groups of valuable socialization experiences and support”.¹⁹

Hagestad points out that discussions about macro- and micro-level intergenerational relationships “have tended to reflect ‘apocalyptic demography’ views of population ageing, with a strong emphasis on the dependencies of old age and the old as recipients”.²⁰ Alan Walker asserts that policy makers “have not grasped the fundamental importance of intergenerational solidarity...they perceive only a funding/spending relationship.”²¹ He maintains that the economic relationship is but one consideration; the intergenerational contract also includes an ethical dimension that represents the social cohesion of societies, achieved by ensuring security for all citizens—not only those able to pay for it. The point Walker makes is that the increasing promotion of individual responsibility for old age as the primary, if not total, focus of policy may contribute not only to a decline in intergenerational solidarity but also to a general weakening of overall social cohesion. He argues that while it makes sound economic sense to adjust to the demographic realities of an ageing society, a one-dimensional interpretation of the intergenerational contract or intergenerational relationships will undermine efforts to maintain intergenerational solidarity.

Instead of pursuing arguments about intergenerational transfers, Governments should be researching interactions between public and private transfer systems. Many believe, for example, that the high level of support for public transfer systems endures in most developed countries because benefit recipients are able to redistribute trans-

fers within the family, thereby strengthening private transfers.²² A better understanding of such dynamics would likely contribute to more effective decision-making.

At a more fundamental level, attention needs to be focused on what happens when social conditions under which intergenerational contracts are formed are profoundly altered by political, economic, cultural or social system changes.²³ Can it be assumed, for instance, that cultural pressures will continue to ensure that family relations remain unchanged? This does not appear to be the case in Japan, where compulsory social care insurance premiums were recently introduced for those 40 years and older when the Government realized that the combined changes in the economic and social climate were such that women could no longer be consistently relied upon to perform the role of caregiver long dictated by tradition. Up until the new policy was instituted, Japan's social care system was relatively underdeveloped for a developed country because of this culturally determined role of women vis-à-vis dependents.²⁴

POVERTY AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL POLICY ISSUE

The commitment made by States Members of the United Nations at the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly²⁵ to reduce by half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by the year 2015 was reaffirmed in the Madrid Plan of Action, as it has become clear that older persons are generally excluded from poverty reduction programmes and targets. Apart from statistics indicating the poverty status of children, major gaps exist in poverty data on specific age groups owing to the lack of detailed data sets in many developing countries. The Madrid Plan takes an intergenerational approach to poverty reduction and development because it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is an intergenerational cycle to poverty that has remained largely unacknowledged by the development and donor community. The NGO HelpAge International argues that "poverty experienced in adulthood is likely to deepen with age, and this in turn has an intergenerational impact within households".²⁶ The Organization's research in Lao shows that while existing family support structures are essentially very strong, "in essence they can be stretched to breaking point by a reduced framework of capacity arising from the ageing process."²⁷ HelpAge has also found that the exclusion of older persons from society is both a cause and an outcome of poverty.

In the intergenerational network, assets and pensions enable older people to maintain their status through continuing contributions to the family. In South Africa the social pension, a non-contributory basic pension for all older members of society, increases the income of poor older persons but has also been found to constitute a source of support for unemployed adults, young grandchildren and other relatives; a large proportion of the pension is used to cover schooling expenses.²⁸ Similar evidence of the resources of older persons being overwhelmingly invested in family maintenance and the education of the young has been reported in Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁹

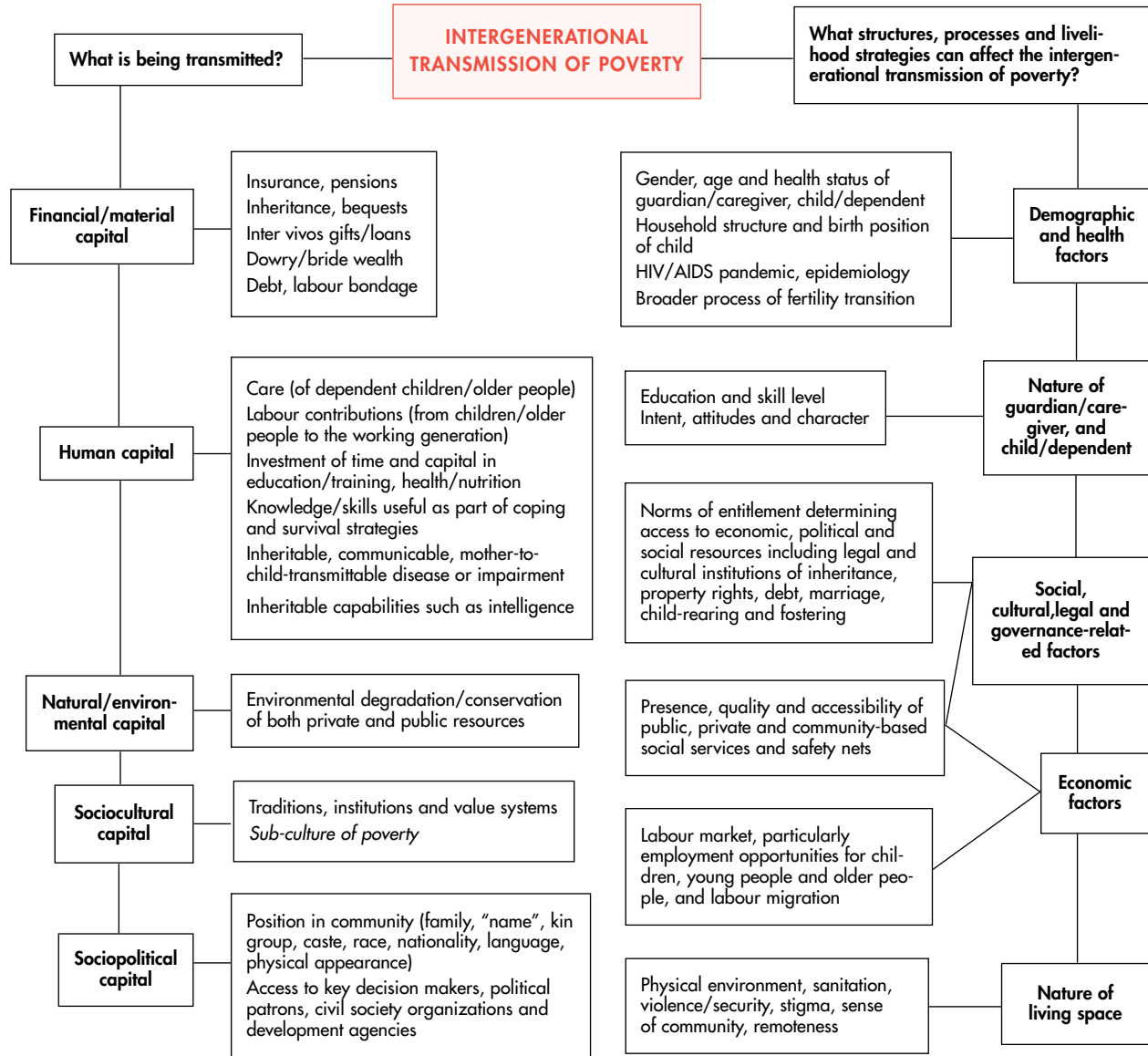
If poverty is not considered within a context that extends beyond individual age groups, poverty reduction strategies will most likely fail because only one part of the problem is being addressed. This is slowly starting to be recognized as a legitimate policy issue. The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS, held in New York from 25 to 27 June 2001, called for financial support for grandparents bringing up grandchildren when research showed that in many countries the majority of adults succumbing to HIV-related illnesses were leaving their orphaned children in the care of older parents; in Ethiopia, for example, this was true in 68 per cent of the cases reported.³⁰ Before this, the fact that whole families were falling into poverty when left to survive on the income of a grandparent was not being addressed. At the other end of the spectrum, the structural damage being inflicted upon intergenerational relationships within families as a result of chronic poverty is now coming to light, with conflicts over the control of scarce resources increasingly leading to the physical and psychological abuse of older people who have legal possession of property. This is particularly an issue when inheritance laws or traditions dictate that material assets devolve from a deceased husband to his wife and are then passed on to his sons in the event of her death. In South Africa, research is indicating growing rates of elder abuse (both economic and physical), particularly at the household level, and the perception is that this is related to escalating unemployment and endemic poverty in a country where the aforementioned social pension is often the only family income.³¹

In a working paper for the Chronic Poverty Research Centre in the United Kingdom, Karen Moore examines the intergenerational transmission of poverty, focusing on developing countries.³² She has designed a framework that illustrates the complex nature of intergenerational transfers, taking into account the different kinds of capital that can be transmitted (*see figure 15.2*). Beyond the issue of poverty, the framework offers a useful tool for analyzing intergenerational exchanges in general.

While the issue of intergenerational relations has been around for some time in the social policy arena, it has invariably been viewed at the micro level and from a paternalistic and welfare perspective. For example, while the 1982 Vienna Plan of Action mentions age integration “in which solidarity and mutual support among generations are encouraged”,³³ within the body of recommendations the link between young people, the family and older persons is referred to primarily within the context of the burden and care of older persons; recommendation 32 goes so far as to state that “the involvement of young people—in providing services and care and in participating in activities for and with the elderly—should be encouraged, with a view to promoting intergenerational ties.”³⁴

Social policies have tended to reinforce and perpetuate the dominant view of older people as passive dependents within multigenerational families, clearly ignoring the fact that most of them are actively engaged in sustaining intergenerational transfers within the social and economic spheres. The older women of one tribe in Ghana, for example, have a tradition of gifting small trading businesses to younger female household members in exchange for reciprocal support arrangements for themselves. The older women continue to operate a smaller doorstep trading business from the home, generating a small income, but also provide childcare and household services for the younger women working in the market.³⁵

Figure 15.2
Intergenerational transmission of poverty



In developed countries, government social policies must move beyond reliance on "traditional" family ideals and models (which some do not acknowledge as having ever existed in many societies) and start integrating provisions aimed at helping family members support each other, at connecting the worlds of work and family, and at breaking down the barriers between what is considered public and private.³⁶ For instance, policy discussions might address community care for all ages rather than focusing separately on the issues of care for children, care for older persons, and care for those with disabilities. The same is true for all policy issues that apply to multiple age groups.

Further attention should also be given to the essential structural components of an intergenerational approach; more specifically, action should be taken to ensure the availability of disaggregated information and statistics, and to mainstream social group perspectives, issues and needs into overall policy-making. More specific and accurate data on the situation of youth and older persons, particularly with regard to poverty, would help ensure that policy makers are not blind to the circumstances of those groups. Disaggregated information could provide a better understanding of how youth and older people experience poverty, and indicate whether their experience is different from that of other groups and from what policy makers assume. The failure to recognize and assign value to the particular situations and experiences of specific group is likely to lead to the development and implementation of inappropriate policies and programmes. A focus on the intergenerational nature of policies also provides a “side door” to mainstreaming, as it increases recognition that all generations are affected by all policies, not only those directed towards them; younger and older persons are no exception.

The Madrid Plan of Action promotes this philosophy throughout, supporting a life-course approach to policy-making in the employment, health, education and other sectors in recognition of the fact that policy decisions should benefit all age groups because ageing is a lifelong process that begins at birth. Just as the Madrid Plan affirms that solidarity between generations is “a major prerequisite for social cohesion”,³⁷ many countries are now recognizing that the dramatic increase in the ageing population will make life-course and multigenerational policies a prerequisite for economic development. In the EU, for example, labour policies now reflect a serious commitment to workforce expansion (including the retention of older workers) as the Union faces the ageing and shrinking of the labour force.

CONCLUSION

The time has come to employ a more age-integrated approach in constructing policies and programmes. “Development thinking is still clearly locked into the old paradigm: social investment is for the young—educating the young ... is the path to development. But this paradigm emerged out of a world which was largely three generational: and increasingly, our new world is four and five generational.”³⁸ In developing countries, less time should be spent focusing on the costs of ageing populations; energies must be directed instead towards developing opportunities for social and economic participation for multigenerational households, strengthening patterns of exchange and reciprocity, and maintaining mutual support structures.³⁹ As Alan Walker argues, what is called for is not a collection of policies that become mired in short-term economic solutions, but rather a new intergenerational contract that reflects an adjustment to the realities of an ageing society in terms of resource distribution and thinking—a contract that reaffirms its own value and ensures future reciprocation for future recipients.

Intergenerational interdependence and reciprocity are reflected in the notion of the “common good” underlying much of social policy and the provision of social services. Built into this notion is the understanding that the “payoffs” from resource allocations are both direct and indirect. Investments in education, health care and social welfare services benefit not just the immediate recipients but the entire socie-

ty, which as a consequence is more engaged, more competitive and healthier. As competition becomes global, education and lifelong learning grow ever more important. Today's workforce must be more capable and productive and sufficiently flexible to respond to changing conditions and new demands and opportunities.

Policies and programmes based on an intergenerational approach should promote an essential interdependence among generations and recognize that all members of society have contributions to make and needs to fulfil. While the nature of these contributions and needs may change during the progression from infancy to old age, the giving and receiving of resources over time is crucial to promoting intergenerational trust, economic and social stability, and progress. The means by which resources are transferred are also important, whether they be formal mechanisms provided by the State or informal kinship and community networks. The continued ability of these mechanisms and networks to collect and allocate resources effectively and equitably builds confidence, trust and social capital that are fundamental to social integration. ■

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⁹ United Nations, Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002..., paras. 42-44.

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, para. 44.

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¹⁵ R. Malhotra and N. Kabeer, "Demographic transition, inter-generational contracts and old age security: an emerging challenge for social policy in developing countries", IDS Working Paper No. 157 (Brighton, United Kingdom, Institute of Development Studies, 2002).

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- ²³ Ibid.
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