

Intergenerational Solidarity: Strengthening Economic and Social Ties  
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### **Intergenerational solidarity: What does it mean and what are the key issues?**

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“Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it onto future generations.” (George Bernard Shaw)

### **Framework of the paper**

This paper has peculiarity. It has been drafted as a particular response to a specific calling: the convening by the United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development of an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on “Intergenerational Solidarity: Strengthening Economic and Social Ties”. Its content tries to be responsive to this particular calling and it has not been drafted according to common rules for academic papers.

Therefore, objectives, both broad and specific ones, established by the host organization should be firstly clearly stated as they were worded:

- Broad objective of the Expert Group Meeting (EGM): “developing specific strategies to promote social inclusion and enhance solidarity between generations” (United Nations, 2007: 3).
- Specific objective of the EGM: “exploring essential elements of solidarity at all levels -- in families, communities and countries” (United Nations, 2007: 4).

Secondly, this author was invited to focus on issues related to Session 1 of the program. This session is expected to tackle the following question: “Intergenerational solidarity: What does it mean and what are the key issues?” (United Nations, 2007: 7). Moreover, questions considered to be within the scope of this session are the following:

How is intergenerational solidarity defined? How has it evolved among different communities/countries/regions (affected by ageing, gender, class, ethnicity, migration, and changes in values, norms, living arrangements, affection, closeness, instrumental support, etc.)? What is the current evidence on patterns and trends among countries or regions? Between developed and developing countries? What is the current policy context with regard to intergenerational solidarity? Are there policies? Are they implemented? (United Nations, 2007)

Unless stated otherwise, the comments below will refer to intergenerational relationships and intergenerational solidarity *outside the family*. We are assuming that rules guiding intra and extra-familial intergenerational processes are connected but different. Actually, trying to bridge the potential gap between these two distinct realms is one of the challenges to be met by current social policies.

In order to better meet the expectations stated by the conveners of the meeting, this paper has been structured according to many UN documents: each numbered paragraph will introduce one relevant idea.

### **Intergenerational solidarity: What does it mean?**

1. The language issue. Let's do not leave semantics aside!

1.1. United Nations do not use the term *intergenerational* consistently, hence a lack of clarity in this debate arises

It appears that the United Nations uses the term multigenerational relationships interchangeably with the term intergenerational relationships. In the gerontological literature, however, these terms have distinctly different meanings. In the view of the authors, the United Nations would be more accurate in using the term intergenerational relationships in documents that refer to the relationships between the generations (Brownell & Resnick, 2005: 73-74)

1.1.1. To the latter regard, translation of original English documents into different languages may be an issue

For instance, the use of the terms *intergenerational* – *multigenerational* in UN documents in Spanish is not always consistent with how they are used in original English documents. For example, this inconsistency is showed in the following excerpts from the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing:

English document:

“Participation in social, economic, cultural, sporting, recreational and volunteer activities also contribute to the growth and maintenance of personal well-being. Organizations of older persons are an important means of enabling participation through advocacy and promotion of **multigenerational** interactions.” (United Nations, 2002: 9-10).

Spanish document:

“La participación en actividades sociales, económicas, culturales, deportivas, recreativas y de voluntariado contribuye también a aumentar y mantener el bienestar personal. Las organizaciones de personas de edad constituyen un medio importante de facilitar la participación mediante la realización de actividades de promoción y el fomento de la interacción **entre las generaciones**” (Naciones Unidas, 2002: 10)

English document:

“Encourage and support traditional and non-traditional **multigenerational** mutual assistance activities with a clear gender perspective in the family, the neighbourhood and the community” (United Nations, 2002: 17)

Spanish document:

“Alentar y apoyar las actividades tradicionales y no tradicionales de asistencia mutua **intergeneracional** dentro de la familia, la vecindad y la comunidad, aplicando una clara perspectiva de género” (Naciones Unidas, 2002: 18)

1.2. Whenever the term *intergenerational* is intendedly used, it tends to concentrate on *generations* as its core component

Intergenerational relationships has been used to refer to relationships *between* (and in some cases among) members of different generations; while multigenerational relationships has been used to refer to two or more generations considered together as a static system. The term “multigenerational relationships” does not appear to refer to the relationships *between* or among those members of the generations under consideration (Brownell & Resnick, 2005: 73).

We argue below that the core of intergenerational is with the *inter*. A change of perspective is needed here.

1.3. The term *generation* is as well multi-faceted

After a review of the literature, Donati (1999) suggests five different ways to conceptualize *generation*:

- Generation in demographical terms: group of people born within a given interval of years
- Generation as age group: a cohort of individuals considered a social group
- Generation as a historical unit: age group able to lead social and cultural movements
- Generation in socio-anthropological terms: people sharing the same position in terms of lineage
- Generation in relational terms: group of individuals who participate in the same relationship, the one linking their lineage position (father, parent, grandparent,...) to their social age (youngster, adult, older person,...)

Depending on the concept adopted the meaning of intergenerational shall change. We tend to oversimplify the potential of this term by reducing it to either a matter of (individual)age or to a question of (individual)lineage:

The age-composition of the population is the background of all ways to analyse intergenerational relations, both conceptually and empirically. Generations are

conceived of as one or more cohorts who are united by certain experiences, by a specific approach to tasks and by a more or less strict sense of common identity. How many cohorts a generation may include can vary. In any case, the notion of a generation implies a difference to at least one other generation. The most general expression of this is the juxtaposition between the old and the young. At the same time, generations belong to the same overall community, society, or, technically speaking social system, thus they are bound to each other by more or less formalised and institutionalised social relations. ( Lüscher, 2000: 11)

However, the relational approach (social age and lineage combined) is a more promising one since we are highlighting the *inter* in *intergenerational*:

I suggest that it is useful to take the institutionalisation of the *relations* between generations as the point of departure for conceptual and empirical, and also policy-oriented, work on the topic, and I conceive of them as clusters. I have borrowed this term from musicology, where a cluster means the simultaneous sound of a row of tones which contains both harmonies and dissonances. (Lüscher, 2000: 11).

#### 1.4. The meaning of *intergenerational* is approached differently depending on the disciplines

“Although both intergenerational studies and family studies consider cross-generation interaction, family scholars utilize a broader definition of intergenerational relationships than the one widely accepted in the field of intergenerational studies. Specifically, family studies includes parent-child relationships, and other kin relationships, among those relationships that are viewed as intergenerational, while intergenerational studies focuses on non-kin relationships and family relationships that skip a generation. Intergenerational simply means ‘between generations’ and thus the inclusion of studies on parent-child interaction is considered important here” (Hanks & Ponzetti, 2004: 8-9).

Mabry, Schmeekle, and Bengston (2001) state: ‘Much research in aging focuses on the relationships and interactions among people of different ages or in different age groups. Intergenerational relationships are *between* family members in a lineage—parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren—interacting at the microsocial level’ (p. 555). (Brownell & Resnick, 2005: 71).

Trans-disciplinary work should be nurtured so that we are able to *undiscipline* this issue. Disciplines usually are more linked to an exercise of control than to one of searching the truth.

**2. The meaning of *intergenerational* is not as simple as it may seem. Which are the key issues?**

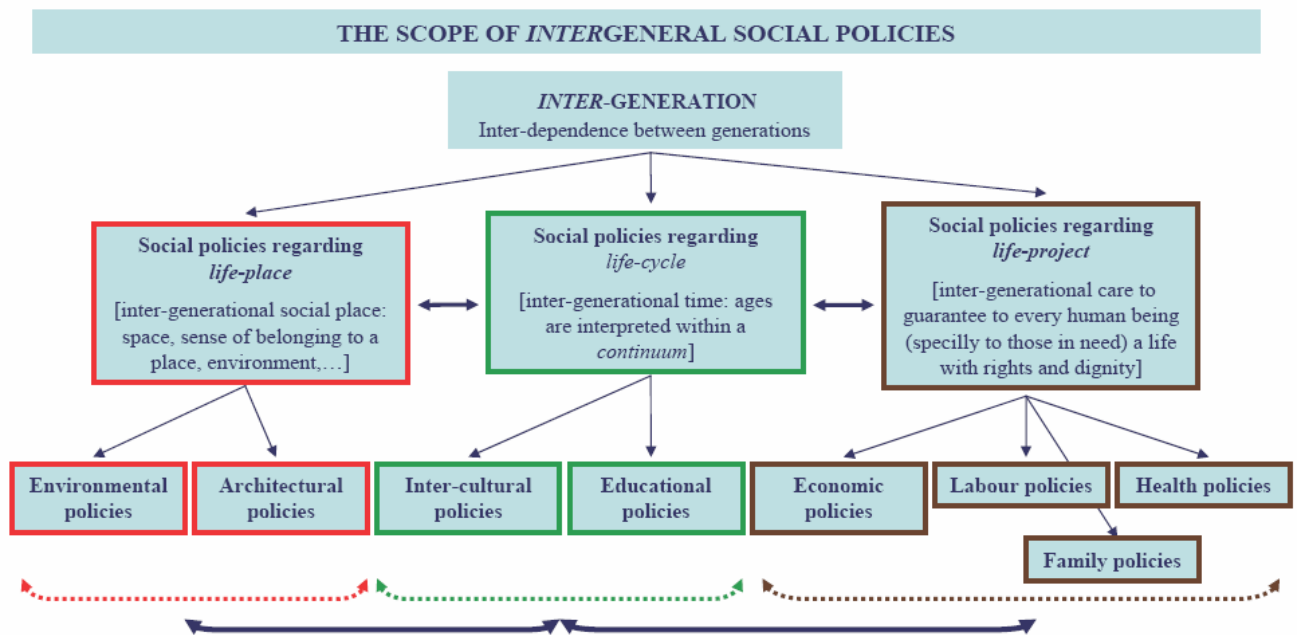
2.1. Ontological re-orientation of the concept

The key of this term should not be with its root *generational* but with its preposition, *inter*. It is the relationship, not the subject (*generation*) what really matters here. Individuals do participate in intergenerational relationships; however, they are not the *nucleus* in these relationships; the real essence is *in-between* individuals but not in them. Here a change of paradigm is needed. Social policies are too frequently individual-centred, i.e. they concentrate on identities (whether at individual, community or society level), on categories (Who does what?). Regarding the *intergenerational* (instead of an adjective it should be treated as a noun), it is the *inter* what matters (What is happening between them?). More than ‘being’, what matters is ‘being together’.

Behind the term *intergenerational* there is an ontology linked to the *inter* and the *with* (‘being with’). It is here that a way to counteract fragmentation and dispersion of life and policies emerges.

2.2. Scope for *intergenerationally-rooted* social policies: Life-place, life-cycle and life-project

The diagram below stems from the aforementioned re-orientation:



The *being-together* rationale pervades each development of *intergenerational* policies (the ones regarding a liveable *life-place*, the ones supporting *life-cycle* and the ones guaranteeing a dignified *life-project*). *Intergenerationality* is not just a facet of social policies but the latter are *intergenerationally-rooted*.

### 3. On intergenerational solidarity

3.1. Intergenerational solidarity is linked to social cohesion and intergenerational relationships.

Thus intergenerational solidarity needs to be broadly characterized in terms of those formal and informal systems, practices and understandings that enable the generations to engage in a collaborative fashion to provide mutual benefit. Such a model resonates with much of the current debate around the need to promote social cohesion and civic engagement. Cross generational relationships can be identified as one of the key networks that can tie communities together. (Hatton-Yeo, in press)

3.2. There is a ‘generational rhetoric’ which may lead us to a too optimistic perception of this concept.

Some scholars have criticised the overly positive and consensual bias of the solidarity perspective. Research within the solidarity framework typically assumes that individuals’ personal feelings —such as affection, attraction, and warmth — serve to maintain cohesion in the family system. [...] Research in this tradition has tended to emphasise shared values across generations, normative obligations to provide help, and enduring ties between parents and children. Thus, ‘solidarity’ contains normative implications which easily lend themselves to an idealisation as it can be observed in ‘generational rhetoric’ (Lüscher, 2000: 12-13)

Against this ‘rhetoric’, *ambivalence* may be the answer: “intergenerational relations generate ambivalences. That is, the observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults can be socio-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences, and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences.” (Lüscher, 2000: 13).

### 4. Policy recommendations

4.1. Firstly, an obvious –but often forgotten- axiom: every policy intendedly promoted to foster intergenerational solidarity risks not only of failing but of reducing it. Whatever the actions (*trials*) undertaken, errors (unintended results) will arise.

It is in the policy arena rather than in the attitudes of younger people and in demography that we find the main threat to intergenerational solidarity. Describing pensions as a burden and encouraging a popular view that older people themselves are a burden may weaken the willingness of younger people to provide support for older ones. If the level of pension that today's younger people can expect in the future is reduced they may question whether it is worthwhile being part of the social contract. At a societal level, the process of revising the social contract may create the conditions for intergenerational conflict (Walker, 2001: 6).

4.2. Examples of policy actions recently recommended (even if at a too abstract level) can be found in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA):

44. Objective 1: Strengthening of solidarity through equity and reciprocity between generations.

Actions

- (a) Promote understanding of ageing through public education as an issue of concern to the entire society;
- (b) Consider reviewing existing policies to ensure that they foster solidarity between generations and thus promoting social cohesion;
- (c) Develop initiatives aimed at promoting mutual, productive exchange between the generations, focusing on older persons as a societal resource;
- (d) Maximize opportunities for maintaining and improving intergenerational relations in local communities, inter alia, by facilitating meetings for all age groups and avoiding generational segregation;
- (e) Consider the need to address the specific situation of the generation of people who have to care, simultaneously, for their parents, their own children and their grandchildren;
- (f) Promote and strengthen solidarity among generations and mutual support as a key element for social development;
- (g) Initiate research on the advantages and disadvantages of different living arrangements for older persons, including familial co-residence and independent living in different cultures and settings. (United Nations, 2002: 17-18)

However, the MIPAA has a sort of twofold bias which prevents it from a more productive contribution: (i) it is still too structured around older persons (instead of ageing), and (ii) it does mangle inter and multigenerational process in a way which make these terms unclear or indistinct.

4.3. Increasing opportunities to *being together*, to *being with*. Beyond, activities, projects and programs, intergenerational spaces should be promoted. To this regard, the intergenerational shared-site model seems to be an interesting and promising avenue (Jarrott & Weintraub, in press).

4.4. Bernard (2006: 6-7), in an effort to stimulate further debate about the (developing) intergenerational field, argues that “Research (and indeed evaluation) underlies, and is fundamental to, facilitating and understanding the linkages between intergenerational practice, policy and theory. [...] [Research] is what holds the ‘jigsaw’ together. This scholar represents this ‘jigsaw’ as follows:



Source: Bernard (2006).

We believe that, in order to strengthen an intergenerational field, it is practice and not research which should come first. Therefore our ‘jigsaw’ is somehow different from the one above:



Consequently, policies should provide as many opportunities as possible to practice intergenerational relationships, to *being with others*. Theory and research sustain (i.e. orient) practice; theory, research and practice constitute the basis upon which policies are thought. However, people need opportunities to practice the *inter*. The more continuous, diverse, and sustainable these opportunities are the better.

##### **5. Finally, on the UN concept of *society for all ages***

In March 1995 the UN Secretary General presented the conceptual framework of this concept. Four dimensions emerged: (i) the situation of older persons, (ii) the life-long individual development, (iii) multi-generational relationships, (iv) and the relationship between development and the ageing of populations. Regarding ‘multi-generational relationships’, the conceptual framework said:

Communities can facilitate multi-generational relationships, both within neighbourhoods and between special interest groups. Though undergoing change, the neighbourhood community is usually age-integrated, making interactions between its younger and older members a matter of daily routine. Communities of special interest, such as organizations of elders or youth, can establish new relationships in addressing community concerns such as safety, environmental protection, cultural enrichment, income-generation and others. Communities can also facilitate communications between younger and older generations, particularly in the exchange of new and old technologies and new and traditional lifestyles. (United Nations, 1995: 7).

It seems clear that, at that stage, ‘elders’ and/or ‘youth’ were considered to be potential actors in the endeavour of progressing towards a (multi-generational) society for all ages.

Seven years later, in 2002, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing has changed the language: intergenerational has opened its way as the key concept in struggling to make the ideal, i.e. a society for all ages, becomes reality. In 1995, multi-generational relationships, as a concept, underlined the fact that we are all inter-dependent. In 2002, inter-generational relationships, as the new keyword, emphasize that we all have to practice solidarity. The progress here seems to be out of any doubt.

However, there is an important lesson to be learnt here. Sidorenko (2007) explains the controversy which came out in the late 1990s around the concept of a society for all ages:

The controversy was based on a presumption that efforts to achieve a society for all ages could lead to abandoning the policies that address specific and often difficult situations of older persons, shifting already limited resources to other social groups, such as children and youth. In the course of debate during the International Year, the UN Programme on Ageing emphasized that although the concept of a society for all ages took a broad and long-term approach to individual and population aging, improving the situation of older persons would remain a paramount task for future action on aging (Sidorenko, 2007: 7).

As far as older persons keep being the core of the UN ageing policies it will be difficult to make the world know that the real issue at stake is intergenerational solidarity. Infancy policies, youth policies, adult policies and older person’s policies should demonstrate more *cross-fertilization*.

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