Population Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity in EU Countries: International Policy Frameworks and Public Opinions

by

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Abstract

The population ageing challenges facing the European Union countries have been articulated in two ways: the financial sustainability of public welfare systems and the adequacy of retirement incomes and basic social services. The ideas underlying social sustainability, though less clearly defined, encompasses not just both these challenges but also address the need to ensure intergenerational solidarity, formally or informally, in countries experiencing an ageing population. This paper addresses policy challenges concerning solidarity between generations and appraises the progress made so far within international policy frameworks while also reporting on the opinions of European citizens on various aspects of intergenerational solidarity.

KEYWORDS: population ageing, intergenerational solidarity, UN policy frameworks

Introduction

The challenges facing the European Union countries associated with population ageing have until recently been articulated in two different ways. First, there is a concern about the financial sustainability of public welfare systems, which are affected adversely by a rising share of older age population. Such concerns have become more evident in the wake of the worst economic downturn Europe has faced since the 1930s. Second, important as fiscal prudence in public spending has become, it is also considered imperative that European social welfare systems continued to provide adequate retirement incomes and sufficient basic social services, such as health and social care in old age.

Each of these concerns justifiably merits the policy scrutiny and priority actions that are happening – albeit at varying degrees and pace – across EU countries and contributing to lessening the future economic challenges. A less discussed and also less clearly defined goal is that of ‘social sustainability’, which encompasses both the ideas of pension adequacy and financial sustainability, but also includes an inter-generational solidarity aspect. The notion of social sustainability requires that a balance is achieved between the distribution of resources across different generations at a single point in time (such as between young and old), and ensuring that future generations of old and young have the same or greater access to social and economic resources as their counterparts in the current generation.

Taking the perspective of the older age generation, the social sustainability requirements include not only provision of adequate pension income but also access to affordable and good quality health and social services. The younger age generation looks into the same issue by raising the question about who will pay for their pensions in the future and about the fairness in the distribution of the social support across generations. What has become obvious is that the societies experiencing population ageing have a new demographic mix in their population and they need to embrace the need for mutually beneficial and satisfying relationships between generations. Creating an awareness of importance of intergenerational relationship, and recognising not only their diversity but also their complementarity will allow public policy strategies and other initiatives to address the resulting needs satisfactorily. Without such awareness and intergenerational policies and initiatives, we believe that a strong risk of perverse ‘competition’ for limited resources across young and old will develop – to the detriment of both generations, and society in general. There is ample scope for developing effective solutions, which are cooperative and mutually beneficial to current and future generations. Thus, in short, intergenerational solidarity
requires ‘fairness between generations as well as the opportunity to develop activities that span the generations’ (Walker 2010, pp. 597).

This paper addresses the policy challenges that intergenerational solidarity presents, and how societies are responding to them. The discussion is structured as follows. Section 2 covers how international policy agendas highlight the importance of intergenerational solidarity in the context of ageing societies, and what is meant by the term intergenerational solidarity within international policy frameworks (using examples from UN and the European Commission). Section 3 shows the first results from attempts to measuring societal response, by providing the current status of public opinions on intergenerational solidarity challenges across 27 EU countries. They have been produced by using results from the Flash Eurobarometer “Intergenerational Solidarity”, conducted during March 2009, providing public perceptions on this matter of about 27,000 Europeans across all EU Member States1. Section 4 concludes, reflects and makes recommendations. Societies must continue promoting positive yet realistic images of the ageing phenomenon and older persons to improve multigenerational relationships, and all stakeholders (civil society, media, academia, governments and EC) will need to play their role in this endeavour.

Policy Challenges Identified in International Policy Frameworks

One of the first related references is the conceptual framework for the preparation and observance of the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP) in 1999 (presented by the Secretary General to the General Assembly on March 22, 1995). It included as one of four key facets the term “Multigenerational Relationships”. The theme of the IYOP, ‘Towards a Society for All Ages’, was also very much related and such a society was defined as one that:

“adjusts its structures and functioning, as well as its policies and plans, to the needs and capabilities of all [generations], thereby releasing the potential of all, for the benefit of all” (United Nations 1995, pp.8).

It goes on to state that:

“A society for all ages would additionally enable the generations to invest in one another and share in the fruits of that investment, guided by the twin principles of reciprocity and equity” (Ibid, pp.8).

The UN premise has been that the multigenerational solidarity and collaboration is essential in facing the challenges of living better lives while enjoying life expectancy gains. As argued by Sanchez and Martinez (2007), such collaborations between generations involve not just their co-existence, but in fact the maintenance of social structures that are capable of responding to the needs of older persons as well as that of people of younger ages. Madrid hosted the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing, in 2002. The political declaration signed at the conclusion of the Assembly, known as “the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing” (MIPAA), had a clear reference of solidarity between generations, in its Article 16:

“We recognize the need to strengthen solidarity among generations and intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs of both

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1 The Flash Eurobarometer survey is conducted by the Gallup Organisation, Hungary, upon the request of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. It marked the 1st European Day on Solidarity and Cooperation, on 29 April 2009.
older and younger ones, and to encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations” (United Nations 2002, pp. 4)

Among others, also Issue 5 has the specific objective of “Strengthening of solidarity through equity and reciprocity between generations”. The actions required under Issue 5 include:

‘(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’ (Ibid, pp. 17).

An important benchmark for Europe during 2002 was the signing of the ‘Regional Implementation Strategy for the MIPAA for UNECE region’ (UNECE 2002). All ten commitments and associated objectives include references to fostering solidarity between generations for the mutual benefit of all.

For example, under Commitment 2, a specific objective states: “Promote the integration of older persons by encouraging their active involvement in the community and by fostering intergenerational relations” (UNECE 2002, p. 4). Commitment 9 identifies the vital role of the family: “To support families that provide care for older persons and promote intergenerational and intragenerational solidarity among their members” (UNECE 2002, p. 19).

The year 2007 marked the 5th anniversary of the signing of the MIPAA and the RIS. The UNECE’s Ministerial Conference on Ageing, in León, Spain, reaffirmed the commitments made in the Berlin Ministerial Declaration in 2002 to implement the RIS of the MIPAA. Also, it adopted the Ministerial declaration “A Society for All Ages: Challenges and Opportunities”, with the following policy commitments by UNECE member countries:

“We are committed to promoting intergenerational solidarity as one of the important pillars of social cohesion and of civil society”. “We encourage initiatives that raise public awareness of the potential of young people and of older persons and that promote the understanding of ageing and intergenerational solidarity.” (UNECE 2007, pp. 4)

In brief, the UN activities over the last two decades show the emergence and growing awareness of the importance of intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion. Through their involvement in ageing related policies, especially since the adoption of 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, they provide a good sense of what is meant by intergenerational solidarity and what is believed to be a desirable outcome: a society for all ages.
The European Union response to recognise and advocate the importance of intergenerational solidarity has come later than that from the UN but it has provided sufficient impetus. One prominent reference from the European Commission is the Green Paper, “Confronting Demographic Change: A New Solidarity Between the Generations”, dated 16th March 2005. Other earlier communications, particularly those referring to the demographic transition and its impact on older people, highlighted the importance of intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion. However, in the beginning, during the 1980s and 1990s, the communications focused on improving the older persons’ situation per se, and less often on relations between older and younger persons for the betterment of both groups. For example, the situation of older people was first addressed in a number of Resolutions by the European Parliament during the 1980s, beginning with its Resolution of 18 February 1982. Then, the Charter on the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers, adopted by 11 Member States in 1989, also referred to older and retired people and brought this group within its remit. Also, the Commission’s Communication on the Elderly of 24th April 1990 set out a basis for action at Community level in the interest of older people.

The two Council Decisions, on European Community action for older people (of 2nd February 1991) and on the 1993 European Year (of 26th August 1992) addressed specifically the promotion of solidarity between generations as a central element in the Community’s approach to meeting the challenge of an ageing population. The principle of intergenerational solidarity as the essential basis for policy development by Member States was confirmed in the Declaration of Principles of the Council of the European Union and the Ministers for Social Affairs meeting within the Council of 6 December 1993, marking the end of the European Year of Older People and Solidarity between Generations.

As recently as 2008, the EU-Presidency event in Brdo (Slovenia), resourced by the European Commission, titled “Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies”, is another example of European Commission’s continued involvement in promoting intergenerational solidarity as central to the European social model. The event had as objective “to initiate a new approach to policy development that ensures solidarity between generations”, and to “present, through examples of good practice, positive cases of intergenerational solidarity and cooperation”. During the event, 29 April was designated as the European Day on Intergenerational Solidarity and Cooperation, and this was an important step for Europe so as to rekindle every year the importance of intergenerational solidarity for a fair and sustainable society. Another example is the Spanish EU Presidency event "Conference on Active and Healthy Ageing", held at Logroño (La Rioja), 29-30 April 2010, which celebrated the European Day of Solidarity between Generations.

A reference in the Treaty on European Union (also known as the Maastricht Treaty), after the amendments introduced in 2007 by the Treaty of Lisbon, is important in making the solidarity between generations an explicit aim of the European Community. Article 3.3 mentions solidarity between generations as one of the key aims of the European Union towards promoting the well-being of European citizens:

“It (the Union) shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child” (European Union 2010, pp. 17).

Partly by reason of these above reasons, the European Parliament and the Council designated 2012 as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (EY2012), in its Decision 940/2011/EU of 14 September 2011. The campaigning efforts of
AGE – The European’s Older People Platform – and other national and European NGOs as well as the European Parliament’s Intergroup on Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity have brought intergenerational solidarity to the forefront of the European debate and policy concern, and to highlight the social sustainability challenges that ageing societies will face.

Current European Public Opinion on Intergenerational Solidarity The Flash Eurobarometer survey No. 269: ‘Intergenerational Solidarity’ is one of the signs of European Commission’s interest in collecting further evidence on public opinions and facilitating public policies and initiatives to promote social cohesion and solidarity between generations, This Eurobarometer survey was conducted by the Gallup Organisation, Hungary, upon the request of Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. It marked the 1st European Day on Solidarity and Cooperation, on April 29, 2009. This is what we turn to now and review the public opinion on different aspects of intergenerational solidarity across 27 EU member States.

More specifically, the results and analysis reported here are derived from the Flash Eurobarometer 269 that was conducted during March 2009 (hereafter Flash EB269). The fieldwork covered over 27,000 randomly-selected citizens aged 15 and more in the 27 EU Member States. Interviews were carried out via fixed-line telephone, reaching around 1,000 citizens in each EU country. Parts of interviews in Austria, Finland, Italy, Portugal and Spain were conducted over mobile telephones. Due to the relatively low fixed-line telephone coverage in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, 300 individuals were sampled and interviewed on a face-to-face basis. (for more details, see European Commission 2009).

We present the key results from Flash EB269, covering three aspects: (a) perceptions on the relations between younger and older EU citizens, (b) perceptions on affordability of pensions and elderly care, and (c) perceptions about the role of public authorities towards intergenerational policies. The two other aspects ‘Contributions of older people to society’ and ‘Autonomous living for the elderly, elderly care and support by social services’, covered in the Eurobarometer and included in the publication (European Commission 2009), have been left out for the brevity sake but also for the fact they are less relevant for aspects of intergenerational relations covered in this paper.

A. Relations between younger and older people

When people living across 27 EU countries were asked about the current state of relations between the young and old generations, they were most likely to say that young people and older people do not easily agree on what is best for society. This result is depicted in the top horizontal bar of Figure 1: 28% strongly agreed, and another 41% somewhat agreed, to the statement that there is a conflict across generations in agreeing what is best for the society in which they live. In terms of country-specific disparity, the conflict is stronger in countries where labour market engagement of older workers is low and where retirees rely more often on public pension incomes. In contrast, people see less often such a conflict between generations in countries where public pension expenditures are low (these insights are drawn from OECD 2011, pp. 8, which made use of the same data).

Along the same lines, a slim majority of EU citizens (56%) agreed that as older people work until a later age, fewer jobs will be available for younger people. This result also points to areas of a potential conflict between generations, and a future risk of mounting tensions that will coincide with a rising proportion of older people. For this specific aspect, the country variation is also analysed below.
In contrast to the above results, Europeans are least likely to agree that older people are a burden on the society (4% strongly agreed and 10% somewhat agreed); more than 60% strongly disagreed that older people are a burden. Further analysis of the same data shows that it is older persons themselves who are the most likely to think that older people are a burden to society (OECD 2011, pp.19). In the same vein, roughly half of EU citizens disagreed with the proposition that the existence of increasing numbers of older voters meant that decision-makers would pay less attention to young people’s needs.

Figure 1: Perceptions regarding relations between younger and older people, EU27 average

![Figure 1](image-url)


In the current environment of high unemployment, the perception older people working later into life would result in fewer jobs for younger people, is quite disconcerting, all the more so for being wrongly based and specious. This perception amongst EU citizens is worrying as it points to a common fallacy, known as the worksharing fallacy (or, sometimes, ‘lump of labour’ fallacy). This fallacy, which was prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s in a number of European countries, implies that older people should retire from the labour market to free jobs for younger people. This is particularly so because youth unemployment has soared during the recession of 2008/09, and with the current recovery being slow and uncertain, these arguments are being given a fresh backing. These ideas were never viable in those previous eras of 1980s and 1990s, as argued in Kapteyn et al. (2004), and they are equally inappropriate in the current post-crises times of austerity and demographic transition. One of the damaging effects of such fallacious reasoning is that the case for policies which promote raising the retirement age is weakened when, if anything, they should be strengthened.

There are wide variations across countries in this respect, as shown in Figure 2. Greeks, Cypriots, Hungarians, Portuguese, Slovenes, Italians and Lithuanians were most worried with the outlook that if older people work until a later age there will be fewer jobs for younger people: in excess of two-thirds somewhat or strongly agreed with this proposition. Denmark offers the other extreme, where 71% of respondents strongly disagreed. The majority of British, Dutch and Irish are also likely to disagree with the prospect of the worksharing idea between younger and older generations. It is interesting to note here that people are less likely to perceive older workers taking away jobs from younger workers in countries where private pensions and income from work typically play an important role in providing income in older ages.
B. Affordability of pensions and elderly care

While the previous perceptions paint a negative picture, things improve a bit when looking at perceptions about affordability of pensions and care for the elderly. By contrast, as many as two-thirds of respondents in EU 27 countries agreed that their government should make it easier for older people to continue working beyond the normal retirement age – if they so wish (see Figure 3). This opinion offers a good prospect of acceptance of longer working careers in the future. Given the perceptions about worksharing (as discussed above), this result shows that people are not linking extension of working careers with youth unemployment (unless prompted), and this is despite high youth unemployment during the current economic downturn.

There are more evenly divided opinions when people were asked whether their national government’s expenditure on young people and on education is too little, in comparison with the amount spent on older people: 46% somewhat or strongly agreed and 43% in total disagreed with this proposition. Thus, on average for all EU countries, there are no serious concerns emerging at this stage about budgetary allocations, and this is an area where there are important country variations and it should be kept on watch in the future.
More relevant and alarming are the results that a little over half of Europeans agreed that employed people will be increasingly reluctant to pay taxes and social contributions to support older people. Using Figure 4, the country variations with respect to this important aspect of economic solidarity across generations are analysed further.

Figure 4 shows that Portuguese respondents most frequently agreed that people in employment will be increasingly reluctant to pay taxes and social contributions to support older people (in total, 77% agreed). Other countries with high proportions of those strongly agreeing with this proposition are Malta, Greece, Bulgaria, Belgium and Cyprus. In contrast, in Denmark, Sweden, Ireland and the United Kingdom, almost 60% of respondents disagreed (somewhat or strongly) that people in employment will be increasingly reluctant to pay taxes and social contributions to support older people. These later group of countries are typically characterised by high labour market flexibility.
C. Role of public authorities

Results included in Figure 5 show that, in people’s opinion, the role of public authorities in promoting relations between young and old is important. Close to 90% agreed that local authorities should support associations and initiatives that foster stronger relations between young and older people, schools should promote better relations between the young and the old, and there should be public centres where older people are helped to find opportunities to volunteer for tasks that match their skills and wishes.

More striking is the result that just over 60% of Europeans disagreed (strongly or somewhat) that their government does a good job in promoting better understanding between young and old. A high proportion (one-tenth) of respondents mentioned that they “did not know” whether their government was doing a good job or not. This country variation with respect to the perceptions about the role of government is further analysed below.

**Figure 5: The role of public authorities in promoting intergenerational solidarity**

Only in Lithuania and Belgium, respondents believed that their government does a good job in promoting a better understanding between young and old (55% and 50%, respectively, agreed with the statement). Respondents in the majority of other EU countries (more than 60%) disagreed that their government does a good job in this respect. The highest disagreement is observed in Hungary (78%), Ireland (76%) and Latvia (71%). Greece and Bulgaria stand out as its respondents were highly likely to “strongly” disagree their government is doing a good job in promoting a better understanding between (51% and 47%, respectively).

Conclusions and recommendations

The international policy frameworks of the UN and also that of the European Community highlight the importance of the intergenerational solidarity in setting the future policy agenda. The Flash Eurobarometer of the European Commission provides the empirical evidence about the current public opinion on solidarity across generations among the EU citizens. A finding of concern is that there is a common perception that people of different generations does not easily agree about what is best for the society. Similarly, there is a common fallacy about the worksharing possibilities between younger and older workers, which has strong implications for the policy debate in the current economic climate. EU citizens also give a strong negative opinion on the performance of the government in promoting a better understanding between the young and the old.

It becomes imperative that European societies continue to promote positive yet realistic images of ageing and older persons. Social and economic interactions through intergenerational activities can generate a positive view towards one another and will play a positive role in the lives of both older and younger people. The policy discourse of active ageing, which is expected to gain momentum as a result of activities of the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012, will contribute towards avoiding the conflict between generations that many argue will result from the demographic shift that our societies are experiencing. This emphasis on active older persons will boost social and behavioural processes that promote the empowerment of older people and overcome the stigmatising representations about them that create an obstacle to their participation, either in the form of labour market activities or in other civic engagements.

A plea is extended to all major stakeholders (civil society, media, academia, governments and the Commission) in their cooperation with each other in raising awareness towards the need of intergenerational solidarity. Roles of local authorities, public volunteering centres and schools to be enhanced in promoting interaction across young and old generations, and governments need to do more to convince and incentivise public about their pro-activity in dealing with challenges arising through multigenerational activities.


