



Policy **brief**

Images of older persons

UNECE Policy Brief on Ageing No. 12
January 2012

Commitment 2 of the UNECE Strategy on Ageing: To ensure full integration and participation of older persons in society.

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Challenging context

The economic and societal implications that result from demographic change may have an impact on how certain generations or age-groups are perceived by the majority of the population or community. Often older family members or neighbours are respected and well integrated members of their community. They also often dispose of a considerable knowledge, experience and consumer power through life-long accumulated savings. Older persons are thus able to assist younger family members and their community with advice through gained experience. But in some cases older persons are faced with neglect and negative stereotypes. A displacement of older persons into segregated communities, an undervaluing of their contributions to society, and negative media portrayals, contribute to a decrease in face-to-face contact with older persons, foster the growth of a gap between generations and a general lack of empathy towards people of different age-groups.

Suggested strategies

A fundamental component of combating ageism and stigmatisation is to open up an ongoing dialogue through accessible and life-long education (in schools, public campaigns, etc), which may lead to a greater awareness of differences in the experience of life-courses. Curricula that incorporate intergenerational perspectives and invite all people to celebrate diversity are also important. Designing and implementing various community programmes that encourage different institutions to have a balanced view on all generations is a key to bridging the gap between generations. Also, Governments may find appropriate means to encourage a realistic and heterogeneous portrayal of older persons in the media. These efforts may include programmes that stimulate or facilitate NGO collaboration of mass media outlets.

Expected result

The goal ultimately is the inclusion of older persons in social, economic and political life, to increase social solidarity amongst all generations on both individual and societal level.

Introduction

What is considered to be old?

Historical and cultural norms impinge on which age-group in society is perceived as old(er). Among other factors, definitions of age tend to rely on societal norms such as the subjective experience of an individual, the role one occupies, or the level of physical and mental ability. In UNECE countries the most used demographic definition of 'old age' is 65 years and older¹. Although the accepted definition of age is chronological, age can also be defined by socio-cultural, biological and psychological processes². Stereotypes about age are based on generalized beliefs about characteristics associated with older people and the perception of the position they hold in society. They often reflect a view that emphasizes the economic notion of human capital and economic productivity³.

Although society might view age in particular ways, the individual experience is also largely dependent on how it is conceptualized by the persons themselves⁴. The subjective experiences of a person are important to understand how the self-perception of a person evolves through the life cycle. Many older persons embrace their age in the context of familial and community ties, or through acquired knowledge and experience. On the other hand, physical and mental capabilities change with age, and it can be difficult for some older persons to adapt, particularly in a society that values youth ideologically, discursively and materially⁵. Similarly, given the prevailing emphasis on productive work, the transition out of the workforce can be challenging to some older persons' self-perception and self-esteem.

Images of older persons in Germany

- The German Ministry of Family Affairs, Seniors Citizens, Women and Youth has developed a comprehensive strategy to raise awareness on a broad variety of images that exist on old age and on the lives of older persons.
- This strategy entails a detailed report on the topic "Altersbilder in der Gesellschaft" (Images of old age in society) prepared for the German Bundestag, the federal parliament, with the purpose to inform members of the parliament and the broader public on the current state of the art. With an intention to further promote research in this area the Ministry also organized a conference with participation of international experts on this topic. A website entitled "Altersbilder. Neue Perspektiven – Neue Chancen" (Images of old age. New perspective – new opportunities) was set up by the Ministry to inform about a range of related projects, such as a Federal Music Week with the participation of over 100 different choirs, a university programme for seniors, and a photo competition on numerous images of old age.

• Source: German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. For further information, please contact Dorika Seib at dorika.seib@bmfjsj.bund.de

• Website: <http://www.programm-altersbilder.de/>

• Report: Deutscher Bundestag. Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung. Sechster Bericht zur Lage der älteren Generation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Altersbilder in der Gesellschaft und Stellungnahme der Bundesregierung. Drucksache 17/3815. 17. Wahlperiode 17. 11. 2010 <http://www.bmfjsj.de/RedaktionBMFSFJ/Abteilung3/Pdf-Anlagen/bt-drucksache-sechster-altenbericht,property=pdf,bereich=bmfjsj,sprache=de,rwb=true.pdf>

• Conference: <http://www.konferenz-altersbilder.de/>

¹World Health Organisation (WHO) (2009) Definition of an older or elderly person. Available from: <http://www.who.int/healthinfo/survey/ageingdefnolder/en/index.html> (accessed June 8, 2011).

² National Centre for the Protection of Older People (NCPPOP) (2009). Public Perceptions of Older People and Aging: A Literature Review. Dublin, Ireland.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See: Hoff, A. (2008). Final report of the research project "Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion of Older People – Lessons from Europe". Oxford Institute of Ageing Working Papers.

Heterogeneity of older persons

Media, societal and cultural perspectives as well as the frequency of contact influence societal portrayal of older persons⁶. In particular a limited contact with older persons may serve to homogenize individual experiences that both create and perpetuate deeply entrenched stigmas of older persons' value and capabilities in society⁷. Older persons are in fact a heterogeneous group that differs based on personality, life experiences, age, gender, sexuality, culture, socio-economic status, geography, health and activity level⁸. As a result, many older persons contribute to society in a variety of different ways, such as passing knowledge down to future generation(s), providing invaluable experience and social support. Limited and negative perceptions of older persons are not benign, as they lead to social exclusion. These perceptions may turn into structural barriers, limiting access to health services, social and employment opportunities, housing and civic engagement⁹.

Perceptions of gender differences

Perceptions of the gender differences among older persons can differ greatly across culture and geography. In many cultures there are distinct roles of the older persons in the community, as well as differing gender roles performed. In society at large, there may be perceptions that there is an equal distribution of care givers amongst genders. However, this is not the case. In general, across cultures women tend to be the primary caregivers of their parents, grandchildren and other people in their community¹⁰. This is even more alarming once we take into account that women by and large have less access to resources, yet they tend to be caregivers both early on in life, for familial or economic reasons, and as they get older. The discussion on gender-specific performance of care tasks is more nuanced than societal perceptions allow. For instance, there is some research that suggests that men in the EU countries tend to be the care givers of their partners¹¹.

Combating causes and effects of stereotype formation

There are many different ways of combating stereotype formation regarding the aged. For instance, closer spatial proximity to older persons lessens the likelihood of their isolation and stigmatization¹². The perception of an age-group is shaped by various personal experiences; therefore face-to-face contact can contribute to a more heterogeneous view on older individuals, and thus reduce stereo-type building.

As a result of closer intergenerational contact, we may appreciate and celebrate diversity, while understanding the value of diverging contributions to society which will help to shift societal notions away from the valuing of persons based on partial measures of human capital. These strategies are intended to combat the causes and effects of stereotyping, as well as to improve the intergenerational perspective on ageing and the instrumental role of older persons in their families and communities.

⁶ See: National Centre for the Protection of Older People (NCPOP) (2009).

⁷ Goffman, E. I. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood-Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

⁸ Bone, P.F. (1991). "Identifying Mature Segments," *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 8 (Fall), 19-31.

⁹ Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman (2008). *Social Exclusion of the Elderly A Comparative Study of the EU Member States*. European Network of Economic Policy.

¹⁰ Huber, M., Rodrigues, R. Hoffmann, F., Gasior, K., Marin B. (2009). *Facts and Figures on Long-Term Care*. European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research. Facultas Verlags- und Buchhandels AG, Vienna, Austria.

¹¹ Fisher, M. (1997). *Man-made Care: Community Care and Older Male Carers*. *British Journal of Social Work*. 24(6), 659-680.

¹² Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman (2008).

Austria – Towards a realistic portrayal of older persons

The Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK) has conducted a study on the topic “Images of Older Persons in the Media”, which showed that older age is still perceived as a status, which one should postpone as long as possible. Because of this there are little visual images of older persons in the printed media. When portrayed, a polarization between on the one hand the “fit, vital and young appearing” older persons and on the other hand the “frail, ill and isolated” became apparent. Images of death and dying persons remain a taboo, whilst older prominent male figures are more frequently portrayed by the media than older women.

Especially during the “European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012” Austria plans to counteract on these stereotype-based perceptions:

Firstly, with the support of a communication agency the Ministry will address journalists in supplying them with different dossiers on age-related issues, of which one will be on the topic “Images of Ageing in the Media”. In addition to this, a photo-database will be available on their website in 2012 for the use of journalists.

Secondly, a documentary, called “Und a jeds Leben is anders“ (“And Every Life is Different”), illustrates the diversity of lives by portraying five different 85-year-old women and men as an example. It highlights how and to what extent care-givers can help people with health impairments to live a meaningful, healthy and dignified life. Film screenings and discussions on the topic “Active Ageing” were and are still held in all federal provinces since 2010.

Thirdly, the Ministry will produce a brochure, where concrete clichés and stereotypes are intently taken up, questioned and disproved with the respective arguments and alternatives.

Source: Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection. For further contact, please email Elisa Zechner at Elisa.Zechner@bmask.gv.at or visit: www.aktivaltern2012.at

Media point of view of elder persons

How older persons are perceived overall in society is difficult to measure. Media portrayals of older persons may be used as an indicator of societal perceptions of ageing and the role of older persons¹³. In North American and Western European media, when images are present, they tend to be polarized, portraying older persons either negatively or positively¹⁴. These images contribute to the distorted perceptions of older persons, which inevitably serve to be stigmatizing.

In reality, however, older persons are diverse and dynamic. In order to provide a realistic portrait of older persons it might be helpful to portray older people in images of contributing to society through helping their families and communities, working or volunteering, passing down their knowledge and experience and celebrating the individual characteristics of each person. Member States might want to develop means to assist media projects that contribute to a multi-faceted and stigma-free perception of older persons.

Croatia: Fade In

Fade In is a media outlet that produces videos and TV reports which focus on civil society in Croatia, and occasionally in the neighbouring countries. The aim of this media outlet programme is to address the social situation of groups with less media attention, such as older persons, by creating positive images. These positive images attempt to contest stereotypical ideas of ageing through educating the broader public on real live stories. Fade In also airs motivational stories about older persons and the different ways they decide to live their lives. Previous topics include: creative ways to combat poverty, bridging the generational gap, motivation portraits (stories of older persons who write stories), and older women who collect healing herbs to empower others to gain independence.

For more information visit the website at: www.fadein.hr or email Spomenka Tomek-Roksandić at spomenka.tomek-roksandic@stampar.hr.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ National Centre for the Protection of Older People (NCPPOP) (2009).

NGO collaboration with mass media

Civil society can make a significant contribution to the way how older persons and intergenerational life is perceived in society. NGO collaboration with various forms of media may increase the impact of this important work. It might provide opportunities for older persons to portray themselves in the media. Governments may want to assist different stakeholders by creating a forum in which civil society and media are able to develop common projects for the benefit of intergenerational understanding.

Czech Republic: Respect my Granny!

The Respect my Granny Programme in the Czech Republic is one of the campaigns that focus attention on social change in media by creating positive images of older persons and providing a forum to discuss related topics. Apart from attempting to combat age-discrimination, Respect my Granny also aims to strengthen the dialogue between generations. The programme does this by providing opportunities for young people to engage in public discussion by collaborating with celebrities. The programme is intended to show young persons that older persons have a lot to offer in terms of age, experience and wisdom.

There are two main activities in this programme that help foster an open dialogue around ageing:

- 1) Young Czech actors and singers and their grandparents together with other young people are invited to join internet discussion about ageing, called “I am against age discrimination and you?” The discussion is advertised through posters that are placed in public areas.
- 2) During the tour 2011/2012 against age-discrimination, young and older persons play in a rock band together. They play and sing in clubs and tour across the Czech Republic. The aim is to entertain people and show them that generations can work together to create something new.

The programme is organised by an NGO called Elpida, which also offers other services such as a free crises helpline for older persons, educational opportunities and leisure activities. It also publishes a magazine for older persons called Vital.

Source: Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. For more information contact: email elpida@elpida.cz or Lenka Bockova at lenka.bockova@mpsv.cz, or visit the website at www.mluvmeostari.cz and www.elpida.cz

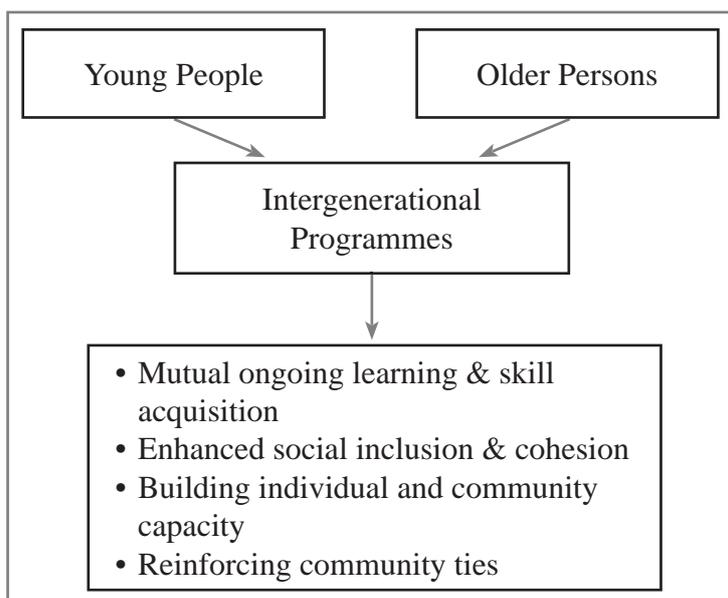
Implementation of the topic “Images of elder society” in school curricula

It is particularly important for younger generations to be informed about the knowledge, experience and contributions of the previous generations. The aim of intergenerational approaches is to teach students of all ages the different and dynamic aspects of older persons¹⁵. This process helps to develop skills like empathy, which can facilitate the development of stronger communication skills and the ability to cooperate and work collaboratively in partnerships with older generations¹⁶. Figure 1 indicates that interactions between young and older people through intergenerational exchanges such as programmes and participation in the community can lead to stronger community building, enhanced inclusion and cohesion within communities and increased capacity overall. Also, it may contribute to a larger social change by combating negative images of older persons.

¹⁵ Kaplan, M. S. (2001). UNESCO Institute for Education School-based Intergenerational Programs. Intergenerational Programs & Aging Penn State University.

¹⁶ Clifton, J. (2009). Ageing and Well-Being in an International Context. Politics of Ageing Working Paper no. 3. Institute for Public Policy Research.

Figure 1: Intergenerational Programmes



There are various ways how the topic ‘Images of older persons’ could be implemented in school curricula. Some of these might include that schools arrange activities for the young and old in the same premises¹⁷, making it mandatory to engage in various types of community services for credit, or requiring projects that combine mandatory community service hours. The results of several studies indicate that images of older persons change positively when intergenerational programmes are part of the learning process¹⁸. For instance, in one study the researchers evaluated the impact of the programme by asking students in the three classes to provide descriptions of “old people” before and after contact with older persons¹⁹. The results show that after the contact with older persons the 2nd and 4th graders used significantly more of positive words to describe older person and notably fewer negative words.

Spain: IMSERSO’s Project “Effective change through education”

The IMSERSO programme concentrates on five different areas of work, namely employment, social inclusion and protection, labour conditions, combating discrimination through the celebration of diversity and the promotion of gender equality, and operates in various Spanish cities through so-called Centres for the Recovery of Motor Disabled Persons (CRMF).

The goal of the IMSERSO’s project was to “sensitize towards the situation of disabled and older persons as a way to prevent discrimination” by creating a curriculum that helps to teach younger persons about older persons in a positive and empathetic light. This was done by developing teaching material in cooperation with the heads of educational centres, directors of studies, teachers, parents associations and kindergarten and elementary schools pupils. Using these resources offered the opportunity for exchange of cultural and social values, to improve the understanding and internalization of diverse attitudes, the development of sensitivity and empathy, and to develop a sense of solidarity and respect for every human being.

Source: Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equity (IMSERSO). Email Manuel Montero-Rey.at: mmonteror@imserso.es

¹⁷ Community Building through Intergenerational Exchange Programs. Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) (2006) Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) on behalf of NYARS

¹⁸ Barton, H. (1999). Effects of an Intergenerational Program on the Attitudes of Emotionally Disturbed Youth toward the Elderly. *Educational Gerontology*, 25, 623–640

¹⁹ Bales, S., Eklund, S., & Siffin, C. (2000). Children’s Perceptions of Elders Before and After a School-Based Intergenerational Program. *Educational Gerontology*, 26, 677–689.

An intergenerational approach in school curricula in Estonia

A programme called “The Little Well-Doer: Together We Learn How to Do a Good Deed” provides concrete suggestions how to combine formal and non-formal education in order to allow an exchange of values and attitudes between children, parents and grandparents. The aim is to raise awareness on the importance of the diversity among different social and age groups through school curricula. The target groups of the programme are primary and secondary school students who should be encouraged to do something altruistic in order to contribute to a society that is tolerant, responsive and caring.

The programme includes three parts: a theoretical overview of the formation of values, practical methods that could be used in the classroom and a collection of ideas that introduces creative ideas for activities out of school hours.

The theoretical overview focuses on the development of helpful behavior and values between generations. Practical methods present active learning methods that can be integrated into the school curricula. Older persons and their experiences are involved in the learning process to improve the understanding between different generations. The methods are mostly playful but still have a concrete educational purpose. The collection of ideas focuses on the interaction between the school and community. The ideas presented in the programme are collected from the interviews with the school personnel and can be used as good examples of activities that can be undertaken after school hours. The older persons are involved in many activities that are organised in the schools but also in the activities organised by schools in the communities. The programme is led by University of Tartu Hospital Children’s Fund.

Source: Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs; Contact Reeli Sirotkina at reeli.sirotkina@sm.ee or triin@lastefond.ee
<http://www.lastefond.ee/lastefondist/kaimasolevad-projektid/kogumik-vaike-heategija/>

Intergenerational perspective on old age and the crucial role of older persons in their families

Older persons often provide support and help for (their) younger families financially, caring for children and through practical help²⁰. Consequently, older persons are not necessarily dependant, but may be care and support providers to their adult children, grandchildren and sometimes their parents. Older persons may also contribute to the passing down on knowledge, experience, as well as the value of intergenerational ties with family, friends and communities they belong to. Therefore, increasing awareness and an understanding of cultural, as well as gender dynamics can enhance intergenerational exchanges²¹.

Belgium: Old and Young Playing Theatre Together on Basis of Improvisation

The ultimate goal of this programme is to empower older persons and to foster intergenerational understanding. It seeks to accomplish this goal by creating and developing positive relationships between adolescents and older people that promote the exchange of memories and experiences.

One theatre project of the programme is aimed at bringing together older and younger people in order to discuss what it means to be young today and what it means to become older. To facilitate this discussion, a film “Valise, Pilule et Chapeau” is shown to the high school students and community groups during the coaching session to highlight the role older people play in society. The group then is trained in drama skills and mentored on how to implement their ideas. The final theatre production is shown at several locations, such as in a secondary school, in a residential home, and in a town-theatre.

Source: For more information Email: i.parentani@entrages.be or visit www.courantsdages.be . Also available in French: info@entrages.be

²⁰ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2010). Intergenerational Family Relationships in Ageing Societies. New York and Geneva.

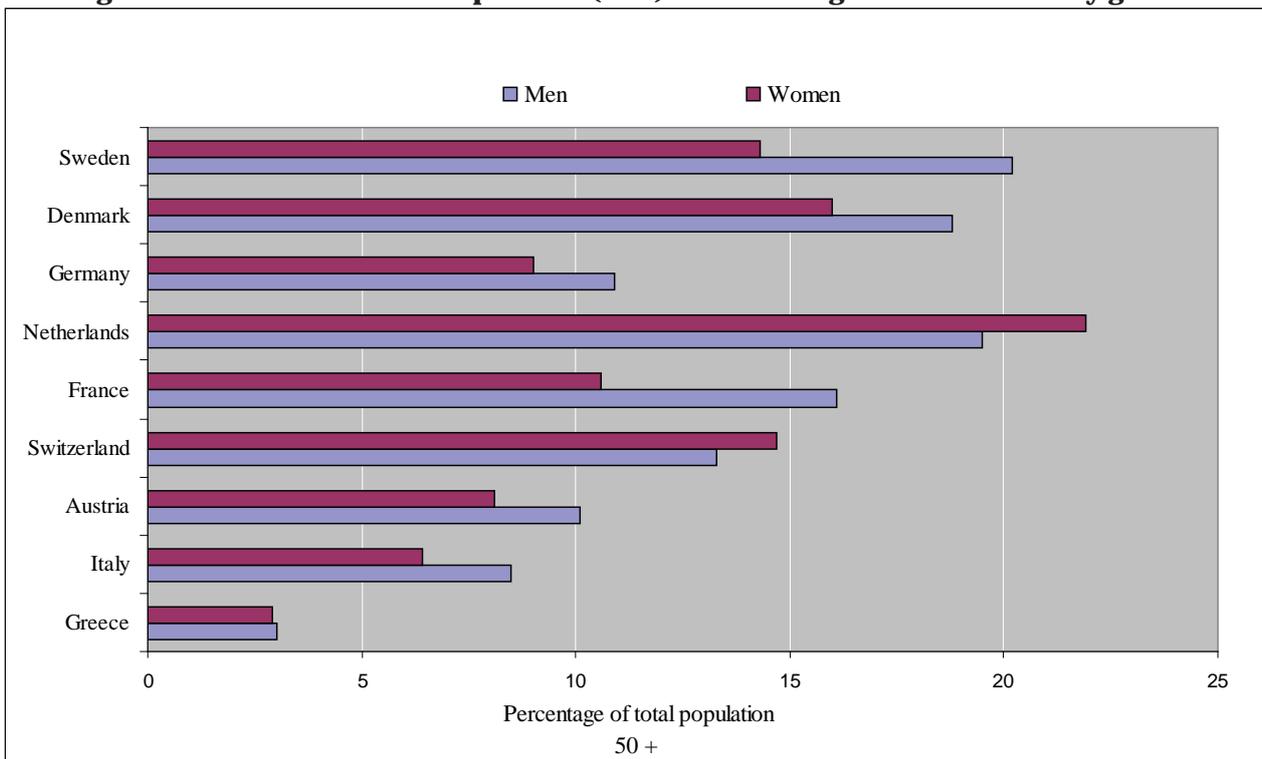
²¹ MacCallum, J., Palmoer, D., Wright, P., Cumming-Potvin, W., Northcole, J., Brooker, M., Tero, C. (2006). Community Building through Intergenerational Exchange Programs. Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS). Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) on behalf of NYARS

Role of older persons within the communities

Older persons are an integral part of the community. Many older persons provide entrepreneurial contributions, care giving, or volunteering and community work. Overall within their communities and society at large, older persons act as invaluable repositories of knowledge on history and society²². With regard to volunteer work, older persons often make important contributions in the unpaid sector. Volunteering is mutually beneficial because it adds immeasurably to different communities, while also permitting older persons to utilize their knowledge and skills.

In fact, up to 20 percent of older persons in Europe engage in voluntary work according to Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)²³. In Sweden and Denmark, 17 percent of older persons report to have volunteered, and in the Netherlands more than 20 percent of volunteers are older persons²⁴. In Germany, France, Switzerland and Austria, 9 to 14 percent of volunteers in the population are of age 50 and up²⁵. SHARE data show that of those who reported to have volunteered in the last month, 18 percent volunteered almost daily, 47 percent volunteered almost weekly and 39 percent worked less. In particular, 58 percent of Dutch older persons volunteer on a weekly basis²⁶. Figure 2 presents share of male and female volunteers among older persons. Member states may wish to enable persons to utilize their productive potential through well designed policies and programmes.

Figure 2: Share of total older persons (50+) undertaking volunteer work by gender



Source: Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) (2005). First Results from SHARE: Work and Retirement. P. 50

²² United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2010).

²³ Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) (2005). First Results from SHARE: Work and Retirement

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Travelling Grannies and Grandpas Programme in the USA

The programme provides individualized mentoring of teenagers, where each Grannie or Grandpa spends four hours per week with his/her teenager in the teenager's own home or in a school setting. The intensive support provided through this approach is the reason the programme is such a success. The services provided through the programme are designed to help the teenagers adopt healthier lifestyle for themselves and their children (if applicable), gain greater self-esteem and self-sufficiency, continue their education or find employment, and to become better parents (if applicable) and community citizens. The older person is able to pass down experience and become active through meaningful engagement.

The Traveling Grannies/Grandpas Programme focuses on the following services:

- Promotion of continuing education
- Discouraging the use of drugs and alcohol
- Promoting positive lifestyle choices and deterring gang involvement
- Practical assistance, support and advice on job placements, applications and interviews
- Demonstrating good health habits for the teenagers and their children
- Teaching of positive parenting techniques (e.g. promoting non-violent disciplinary approaches)
- Instruction in nutritious meal planning, preparation and wise food shopping
- Transportation to medical appointments, vocational training, etc.
- Deterring future teenager pregnancies

Source: www.gerontologynetwork.org; on the Gerontology Network's home page click on Volunteer Programs and scroll down to read a brief summary on the Traveling Grannies/Grandpas Program. For more information, please call the Program Creator/Director Rev. Peggy Lawrence Burns at 001 (616) 771-9749.

Conclusion

Older persons are valuable members of their families and the communities they belong to. However, when older persons' contributions are not appreciated, it may add to a process of discrimination and isolation. To effectively combat causes and effects of stereo-type formation the following strategies are recommended:

Media point of view on older persons

The perception of what it means to be "old" is strongly dependent on personal experience, but also on public opinion. Various forms of media largely contribute to the perception of age. Governments could facilitate communication on this topic by offering training courses to media representatives, or awards for stereotype-free reporting or other relevant media projects. Civil society may be integrated into this process.

Implementation of the topic "Images of elder society" in school curricula

To communicate the situation of different age-groups to young people, the implementation of intergenerational and life-course concepts are useful means. This could be introduced in form of formal school curricula or voluntary activities which are aimed at helping young generations to understand the situation of other generations, and de facto of their own future. This emphasizes: mutual learning, engagement and participation on multiple levels in schools, families and communities.

Intergenerational perspective on old age and the crucial role of older persons in their families

Another key component of bridging the gap between generations is through the facilitation of intergenerational exchanges of resources and ideas that increase understanding and co-operation between generations. Projects that facilitate contact between generations in a societal and familial context are useful to diminish prejudices and stereotype-building.

*Role of older persons within
the communities*

The overall aim of this strategy should be an increase in community building through activities, which should lead to enhancing social inclusion and cohesion, and which should strengthen individual and community capacity to fully participate in social and community life.

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Checklist : Images of older persons		
Main areas	Areas of implementation	Key elements
Media campaigns for support	Awareness raising	Promoting positive images of older persons
		Inclusion of multi-generational perspectives in various media outlets
		Providing incentives for positive depictions of older persons
NGO collaboration with mass media	Generating community and organizational partnerships for mutual benefit	Campaigns and annual events that promote collaboration and positive images of older persons
		Media coverage on topics pertaining to older persons
Intergenerational programmes	Bridging the gap between generations	Increase face-to-face contact
		Building individual and community capacity
		Valuing contributions (e.g. volunteering and care-giving)
		Facilitate contact with family, friends and community
		Intentional exchanges of resources
Inclusion of topics related to “Images of older persons” in school curricula	Life-long mutual learning	Skill acquisition
		Reinforcing community ties
		Intentional exchanges of ideas, knowledge and experiences
Community life	Social inclusion and participation	Activities offered appeal to a diverse population of older persons.
		Gatherings including older people are held in various local community spots, such as recreation centres, schools, libraries, community centres and parks