

2007 UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing, León – Spain

Panel E: Intergenerational collaboration

Statement of the Dutch delegation.

Intergenerational collaboration

Strengthening social cohesion through for example intergenerational collaboration is necessary to prepare the welfare state for the challenges it will face in the future. This is one of the conclusions of the research to the prospect of the Dutch welfare state made by the Dutch Scientific counsel for government policy.

I shall give a short description of how the counsel reached this conclusion.

The Dutch welfare system originated in the second half of the twentieth century. It concentrated on insuring people against risks of life and caring for those who were affected by events like disability or illness. Problems with the structure of the labour market, the growing number of disabled people who are not part of society and the problem of financing the system have led to recent adjustments.

Looking back, we see that the classic welfare state has led to much more independence between citizens and generations. This has resulted in smaller families, looser family ties and the fact that relatives live farther apart. Relationships in other traditional communities such as neighbourhood and church have also decreased.

These developments occurred during a period that is characterized by individualization and by emancipation and professionalization of different age groups. The consequences of these developments is that the contact between generations is less obvious, which has impact on the social cohesion of society.

Exclusion of certain groups has also an negative impact on social cohesion. An ageing society increases the possibilities to the exclusion of certain groups. A strong (policy) focus on the elderly carries the risk that younger generations will be forgotten or at least fall behind. Although the Dutch welfare state already has good provisions in place for the elderly, it is expected that spending on healthcare and provision for this age group will increase further in the coming years. This is in contrast to the situation for younger generations. Generally, provisions and services for these generations are less numerous than for the older generation. Also

on other issues the position of the younger is not always better. Members of younger generations are also more affected by cutbacks in the social security system, their position on the job market is not better than that of the older generation and their chances on the housing market are poor. And there is also no prospect of offering the members of younger generations the same amount of care in the future that members of the older generation receive nowadays.

Changing the balance between young and old will be difficult. Facing the fact that the older generation already forms a strong electoral force and will become even more powerful. If this generation loses sight of the problems faced by younger generations, they run the risk of excluding that generation.

The potential exclusion of one or more generations threatens to undermine the contact and solidarity between generations. These are worrying developments, realizing that solidarity and social cohesion are necessary for a welfare state to function properly. In the past the focus in the Netherlands was too much on the insurance and care aspects of the welfare state. The importance of social cohesion for the sustainability of specific the solidarity, and the welfare state in general, was not recognized for years. Now we are facing the challenge of reintroducing social cohesion as a policy item. Because knowing each other and recognizing each others situation and understanding that one faces similar problems creates feelings of connection and solidarity. Intergenerational collaboration can help to create more social cohesion between different age groups. It can bring generations, which appear to have nothing in common, closer together. When they realize that they have more in common than they thought, generations often recognize that they can mean something to each other as well. Let me give some examples.

First: policies based on stages of life and life-course approach. Every generation profits from these types of policies. However, collegiality and solidarity and therefore knowing each other situation are necessary for a successful implementation of these wishful policies.

Secondly, collaboration can also exist through combining the knowledge and expertise of two generations. An older person designs a product which can be marketed on the internet by a younger person.

And third and very well known is informal care, a traditional form of intergenerational collaboration. This is much neglected (as well by policy makers and by (informal) caretakers) during the past years in the Netherlands, because the focus is mainly on formal care. In informal care we see members of different generations support and help one another. Think of shopping, help with cooking, installing modern electronic equipment and babysitting. In this way generations help one another to live independently for as long as possible or to participate in the labour market.

It can be concluded that intergenerational collaboration contributes to:

- Mutual respect which leads to less stereotypes;
- Mutual support for young and old;
- Recognize and accomplish matters of collective importance;
- Reduced danger of social exclusion primarily for members of younger generations;
- Less social isolation and the ability for members of the older generation to live independently for longer;
- Empathize with situations of the other;
- Achieving a better balance between formal and informal care and between work and private life;
- Reduce the feeling of difference between generations.
- And last but not least it helps to strengthening the social cohesion.

Intergenerational collaboration is a good way of attaining the goals of the Madrid action plan on ageing. It stimulates active ageing, reduces social exclusion and age discrimination. In this way, it contributes to a better balance between home life and work life and creates more room for informal care. This increases the sustainability of the formal care sector.

Remains the question how? Stimulating intergenerational collaboration is pre-eminently not only a task for the national government. Yes, the government can take common actions like legislation and financial support. But other actors, like civil societies, citizens and local government have to take the first move in realisation of these goals. They can take initiatives like: social practical as a compulsory part of the education, support informal care and voluntary work, realise intergenerational combined living - care neighbourhoods, but also other communities and even virtual communities can play an important role in stimulating intergenerational collaboration.

Intergenerational collaboration: not forcing but stimulating and facilitating. In this way, ageing will be a challenge for each generation.

Thank you for your attention.