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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Promoting European intergenerational solidarity – towards an EU horizontal approach

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2024/6869)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. In its previously adopted opinions, the EESC welcomed the European Union Youth Strategy ([1]) and proposed a new European Strategy for Older Persons ([2]). In this context, the EESC also calls on the European Commission to adopt a coordinated, cross-cutting EU approach to intergenerational solidarity, which should focus on ensuring the rights of both young and older people as well as their full participation in society and the economy, including employment, education and culture. Against the background of demographic challenges, it should also be one of the criteria for assessing whether legislation and other EU instruments contribute to the aims set out in Article 3(3) TEU: 'The Union (...) shall promote (...) solidarity between generations'.

1.2. As a first step in this direction, the EESC calls on the European Commission to publish a Green Paper on Intergenerational Solidarity. The Green Paper may include, within the context of the Welfare State, challenges, opportunities and solutions as listed in Chapter 3 of this opinion in the fields of the world of work, the silver economy, pension systems, health and care services, local development, housing, mobility, climate policy, lifelong learning as well as participation and volunteering.

1.3. Furthermore, the Committee calls on the Member States to exchange their best practices in those fields and to implement the recommendations included in this opinion.

([1]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Engaging, connecting and empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy' (OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 142).

([2]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on a European Strategy for Older Persons (OJ C 349, 29.9.2023, p. 28).

1.4. The EESC also calls on the European Commission to adopt a recommendation calling on the Member States to take into account the intergenerational aspects in the labour market, in particular by setting adequate and just employment standards for all generations and ensuring the participation of different generations and their cooperation in the workplace. Secure employment contracts, secure and sufficient income and in-service training opportunities ought to be key components of these standards.

1.5. Furthermore, the Committee believes that intergenerational dialogue, justice and solidarity should be discussed and included in the Council of the European Union's Conclusions.

1.6. The EESC requests establishing intergenerational solidarity as one of the objectives under the European Social Fund in the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework and its implementing regulations.

1.7. Civil society organisations and social partners play an important part in promoting intergenerational solidarity. They have a key role in planning and implementing specific policies mentioned in Chapter 3 of this opinion. Many of them represent different generations and focus on providing social services in cooperation with volunteers from all generations. The EESC would like to work closely with the organisations concerned when implementing the recommendations made in this opinion.

1.8. The EESC supports the initiative taken by civil society organisations, social partners and European and national institutions to continue celebrating the EU Day of Solidarity between Generations ([3]) on 29 April, which marks an annual milestone to continue raising awareness about and to promote intergenerational solidarity across the EU.

1.9. The EESC welcomes the intention to appoint a Commissioner with responsibility for intergenerational fairness ([4]). As a response from the house of European civil society, the Committee will consider hosting an Intergenerational Solidarity Forum for the exchange of information and experience in this field, for evaluating existing and developing new concepts of and strategies for intergenerational solidarity as well as – in cooperation with the European Commission – to monitor the implementation of the opinion's recommendations.

2. **Context**

2.1. The age structure within the EU-27 population is changing. From 2002 to 2022, the share of the 65+ age group in the population increased from 16 % to 21 % ([5]). The number of people aged 65+ per 100 people aged 15-64 is projected to increase from 33,3:100 in 2023 to 45,5:100 in 2040, and to 59,7:100 in 2100 ([6]), which means that there will be 59,7 older people for every 100 people between 15-64. In 2002, there were 14 494 144 people over 80 living in the EU, corresponding to 3,38 % of the total EU population in 2002. In 2022, 27 102 994 people over 80 were living in the EU, corresponding to 6,07 % of the total EU population in 2022. In 2040, 39 663 244 people over 80 are expected to live in the EU, corresponding to 8,78 % of the total EU population in 2040. This also poses challenges in terms of pension policies and access to health and social care services.

2.2. This demographic trend paired with multiple crises in climate, democracy and security, consequences of which particularly affect young people and future generations, are creating an urgent need to design a new political approach of intergenerational solidarity in the European Union.

([3]) The European Day of Solidarity between Generations was launched in 2009 by the European Parliament and the European Commission as part of the European Year of Solidarity between Generations. Its aim is to raise awareness of the importance of intergenerational solidarity and to promote dialogue and cooperation between people of all ages. The day is celebrated every year on 29 April.

([4]) https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf, pp 19/20.

([5]) Demography of Europe – 2023 edition, quoted from the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee — The impact of demography on Social Europe (OJ C, C/2024/6867, 28.11.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/6867/oj).

([6]) Projected old-age dependency ratio, quoted from the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee — The impact of demography on Social Europe (OJ C, C/2024/6867, 28.11.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/6867/oj).

2.3. This opinion focuses on the needs and contributions of all generations, especially on the unique challenges and opportunities facing older people and youth. Conducting analysis that considers the perspective of young people and future generations can and should contribute to better and more tailored policies that are also capable of addressing the challenges of future generations. All generations – including the future ones – must have the right to realise their core values and needs. Governments should pro-actively foster intergenerational justice and intergenerational dialogue as well as solidarity from a public governance perspective and deliver policies and services in a fair manner across different age cohorts, which means satisfying the needs and expectations of all generations and not disadvantaging any generation ([7]). Intergenerational dialogue, as a particular form of civil dialogue, can contribute to policies which take different trends and future scenarios into consideration. Intergenerational justice, dialogue and solidarity are crucial for the sustainability of democracy, social cohesion and the European way of life.

2.4. Intergenerational solidarity is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It is also about sharing knowledge, skills, cultural norms and traditions, as well as mutual support and pooling of resources. Moreover it is about promoting an adequate standard of living for all age groups. All of this is taking place against the background of demographic changes: changes in the structure of families, fertility, life expectancy, living conditions and migration.

2.5. Intergenerational solidarity is also crucial to overcoming age discrimination against old and young people and inequalities between generations in the context of the current demographic development. It is essential to design social policies and services that take a life-cycle approach and that are fair, accessible and available for all age groups. Younger and older people often experience discrimination simply because of their age. The report on ageism published by the WHO in March 2021 ([8]) highlights the age-related barriers that still exist in different areas of life such as employment, political participation, health and justice.

2.6. Intergenerational solidarity is also crucial in overcoming the subculture of the consumer society, which favours 'eternal youth' as a special value, which is by no means shared by the whole youth generation. Moreover, there are still mutual stereotypes and prejudices that exist between generations. Negative stereotypes about ageing, including the image in the media, portray older people as sick, dependent and costly to society, but there are also negative stereotypes of young people who are portrayed as inexperienced, lazy, unreliable and selfish.

2.7. Intergenerational solidarity is crucial to developing a fair and sustainable society as well as economic prosperity, to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and to ensure the durability of both representative and participatory democracy in the European Union. For the latter, intergenerational projects are of great importance because they strengthen the sense of responsibility for the common good. Moreover, the 'contemporary witnesses' can play an important role in strengthening pro-democratic attitudes by presenting real experiences from dictatorship systems to young people, while young people can offer fresh perspectives on emerging challenges and opportunities.

2.8. Intergenerational solidarity should be also intensively practised in the life of civil society organisations such as associations, employers' organisations and trade unions as well as within political parties.

2.9. Family life is another important factor in developing intergenerational solidarity. Intra-family cooperation and solidarity is a valuable asset and is regarded as such by many people. In people's wider living environment (e.g. in the local community), intergenerational conflict is also much less common than intergenerational solidarity, which was strikingly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.10. The EESC believes that one of the most important instruments to achieve crisis-resistant solidarity between generations is intergenerational dialogue based on intergenerational justice and fairness.

([7]) In at least nine OECD countries and Malta there are public institutions to monitor the implementation of government commitments to future generations. Some of the entities: Hungary (Deputy Ombudsperson for Future Generations), Wales (Future Generations Commissioner), Malta (Guardian of Future Generations).

([8]) https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866.

3. **Intergenerational solidarity: challenges and solution approaches**

3.1. **The world of work:** Empirical studies ([9]) show that multigenerational teams are more productive than single-generation teams. In such teams there is a creative confrontation between the knowledge, skills and experience of different generations. In addition, having multiple generations in one workplace is an effective way to combat both age stereotypes and discrimination. Avoiding direct or hidden discrimination against young people (e.g. 'they can't do it yet') and old people (e.g. 'they can't do it anymore') strengthens participation in the workplace. Therefore, the participation of different generations and their cooperation in the workplace should be an important issue in the social dialogue as well as the exchange of best practices within employers' associations with regard to skills- and experience-based staff development towards a multigenerational workforce and age management. This should lead to voluntary established standards within regions and/or industrial sectors. For example, the European Social Partners' Autonomous Framework Agreement on Active Ageing and an Inter-generational Approach (March 2017) provides a good basis for establishing the right conditions for achieving intergenerational workplaces ([10]). This framework agreement stresses the added value of an age-diverse workforce, suggests instruments and provides for an intergenerational approach. In the three years following the adoption of the agreement the national social partners reported on its implementation ([11]) as well as best practices at the national level, which enable mutual learning. Moreover, social campaigns aimed at employment of elderly people may be an effective tool to improve intergenerational solidarity at work. The foundation for intergenerational solidarity at work is, however, the avoidance of any form of age discrimination, a result of discriminatory wage and social protection policies, and the enhancement of youth labour market access.

3.2. **The silver economy:** The 'silver economy' is defined as the segment of the economy geared towards meeting the needs of older people. In 2015, it was estimated to generate an annual financial turnover of EUR 4,2 trillion and more than 78 million jobs in the EU ([12]). The development of the silver economy also creates opportunities for intergenerational solidarity to develop, including through the involvement of multigenerational teams in designing and testing goods and services. An increasing share of the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services is aimed at using the purchasing potential of older people to satisfy their consumption, living and health needs. This 'second demographic dividend' can support the economic development of the EU Member States. Therefore the EESC believes that there is a need for a long term EU strategy on development of the silver economy.

3.3. **Pension systems:**

3.3.1. Most pension systems in the Member States operate on a pay-as-you-go basis. Due to increased life expectancy, pensions are paid out for longer. In order to stabilise pension systems, the retirement age has been increased, or this is being considered, in many Member States. In some countries, the retirement age is rising alongside changes in life expectancy, which, regrettably, in many cases disregards the position of those in hazardous or physically challenging occupations, even if they have been making social insurance contributions for a very long period.

3.3.2. The cost of pension systems is growing, which may limit the demand for labour due to rising labour costs. In addition, in some cases, young people are employed on contracts that result in reduced access to social protection and lower contributions. At the same time, this leads to lower revenues from pension contributions and a larger deficit in pension systems.

3.3.3. Since not only life expectancy, but also healthy life expectancy is increasing, it is worth considering – bearing in mind different circumstances and specific systems in the Member States – whether those additional healthy years could be spent not only in retirement, but also in longer working lives, when an individual wants to work for longer. Nonetheless, any such increases should be introduced in a long-term perspective, stepwise and without undermining the trust in the social protection systems. Linking the retirement age to changes in life expectancy could support longer and more productive employment, at the same time helping to stabilise pension systems and thus contributing to intergenerational justice. However, raising the retirement age would not be feasible in work that is very physically and psychologically taxing.

([9]) E.g. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7732046/.
([10]) https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?mode=dsw&docId=11775&langId=en.
([11]) https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?mode=dsw&docId=12286&langId=en.
([12]) The silver economy: final report.

3.3.4. Ensuring that people can live in dignity on the financial basis of pensions remains both a public and a societal obligation. The full implementation of Principle 15 of the European Pillar of Social Rights ([13]) (right to pensions commensurate to their contributions, that ensure an adequate income to live in dignity in old age) should be an important element of the European Semester.

3.4. **Health and care services:**

3.4.1. As in the case of pensions, most health services are financed by contributions from economically active people. Young people use these services much less than the older generations. Even though in some Member States healthcare is partially tax-financed, economically active people contribute more through taxation, although they in turn will receive more when they are older.

3.4.2. Moreover, economically active people are facing an increasing burden of informal care for older people, especially family members, which limits their possibility to retain jobs. This is especially true for women, who in general take on this responsibility more often than men, while the availability of professional long-term care services varies significantly across the Member States. At the other end of the spectrum, young families often struggle to find affordable and accessible childcare, which also impacts their labour market and employment prospects, particularly for women. Despite the fact that healthcare expenditure is one of the most important drivers of rising public spending, it should be noted that in some Member States the affordability and accessibility of health services for older people are absolutely inadequate. In this context, a preventative approach to health should also be promoted for healthier lives.

3.4.3. Nevertheless, as part of intergenerational solidarity, social and long-term care services should be accessible, affordable, integrated and community-based, as well as co-created by citizens and their organisations ([14]), which would reduce the care burden for the working-age generation and assist those who choose to care for their loved ones.

3.4.4. Furthermore, it should be noted that the EU is seeing a decline in acute illnesses compared to chronic diseases, including 'civilisation diseases', like dementia and mental illnesses which require long-term and sometimes very costly treatment. This process is also linked to unhealthy working conditions, unhealthy diets and individual lifestyles, both for younger and older generations as well as to undesired loneliness. The EESC therefore reiterates its support for the European Commission's recommendations on combating undesired loneliness, aimed at ensuring that mental health services are easy to use across the generations, and calls for an EU Mental Health Strategy to address mental health concerns across generations, and the deepening youth mental health crisis.

3.5. **Local development:** Infrastructure and services of general interest should meet the needs of all generations. This requires representatives of all generations to be involved in the political and social life of municipalities, cities, districts and regions so that the democratic institutions in a given area can ensure a productive exchange of ideas between older and younger residents. In fact, all generations should contribute to cohesive local development and decision-making to shape age-friendly communities, supporting all generations. In particular, young people should be encouraged to engage in local activities, e.g. through funding and recognition of local youth councils, and remain active when growing older, having families and later reaching the retirement phase.

3.6. **Housing:** While home ownership is becoming an unfulfilled dream for many young people and families, changing family structures and the rising share of single people as well as the lack of affordability are also affecting the structure of housing. Housing should be made affordable and models explored to bring communities and different generations together. Multigenerational housing is on the rise in many EU Member States. Generations living together not only provides an opportunity to exchange services such as care for children or older people, grocery shopping, minor repairs or using the internet, but also increases the sense of security. Even in the case of individual people of different generations living separately, multigenerational meeting places in the form of non-residential buildings or 'retirement clusters' within housing estates and residential areas could play a similar role. Moreover, urban planning should focus on making public spaces age-friendly.

([13]) https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1606&langId=en.

([14]) See Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Co-creation of services of general interest as a contribution to a more participative democracy in the EU (OJ C 486, 21.12.2022, p. 76).

3.7. **Mobility:** The impact of mobility – adapted to the needs of all generations – on quality of life, participation and autonomy is underestimated. Public transport systems are equally important to ensure the participation of children and young people (including in education, especially in remote rural areas) and the participation and autonomy of older people. People at different ages should have easy access to transport services. However, the needs of particular generations are not sufficiently taken into account in the planning of transport and mobility systems. In the context of the climate policy, free public transport, as already practiced in some EU areas ([15]), also seems to be a solution worth considering.

3.8. **Climate policy:** Global climate change raises serious problems of solidarity between the current and future generations, and among communities within these future generations. The strategy for climate change should be developed in accordance with the principles of intergenerational equity. The strategy should include measures to slow the rate of climate change, to minimise direct damage from climate change, and to transfer the resources and tools necessary to adapt to climate change. In this respect, the interests of all generations are aligned. The climate crisis affects everyone, older people given the negative impact of climate change on public health, quality of life and safety, while young people and future generations will have to face the most severe consequences of the climate crisis and bear the consequences for longer. Young people have been at the forefront of establishing movements to push for climate action such as Fridays for Future. In some EU Member States, intergenerational alliances and movements are also taking shape in which older people are taking responsibility for the future of their children and grandchildren, e.g. by joining movements like Fridays for Future.

3.9. **Life-long learning:** Changing skills needs as a result of globalisation and the green, demographic and digital transitions require well-designed lifelong learning policies. This is particularly important for older workers, who are at risk of job losses in sectors most affected by these transitions, but also for all generations to enhance life satisfaction and increase access to different opportunities. Cooperation with the social partners and with other civil society organisations is needed to promote lifelong learning. Another important aspect of lifelong learning is the transfer of knowledge and experience between generations. A well-known example is young people supporting older people in acquiring digital competences. Another example is older people volunteering to give lessons, alongside teachers, in schools (e.g. ethics, history, politics). Such interactions can also inspire critical reflection on the role and achievements of one's own generation.

3.10. **Participation and volunteering:** Exchange between generations can be further stimulated by participation and volunteering – activities, which enrich the lives of all ages and communities. Intergenerational volunteering has become a permanent fixture of volunteering activities across the EU and is already supported by EU and nationally funded projects. At local level, intergenerational volunteering also includes initiatives for 'caring communities' made up of professionals, volunteers and family members. Intergenerational solidarity encourages the creation of different social networks, which can include people of all ages. This can help individuals feel more connected and included in their communities and combat undesired loneliness, as well as improve mental health, and create a more inclusive, understanding community.

Brussels, 18 September 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([15]) E.g. Luxembourg (for everyone), Tallinn (for residents), Hungary (EU as well as Swiss and Norwegian citizens older than 65).