

## **BRIEFING**

# **BUILDING INCLUSIVE LEARNING SOCIETIES: ACTIVE AGEING AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS**

The EU population passed the 500 million mark back in 2008. This growth has been fuelled mainly by immigration, whereas the population is becoming older and more diverse<sup>1</sup>. A slightly higher fertility rate and increase in life expectancy have also contributed to this growth. Nevertheless, by 2014 the European working-age population will start to shrink, while the number of over-60s will increase rapidly, by about two million people per year as a result of the large group of post-war baby-boomers reaching retirement. The average age in the EU (European Union) is now around 40 years, but by 2060, it will have increased to 47. However, Europeans are not just living longer. They are also on average healthier than ever before, which offers an important potential for our society.

Against this background, 2012 was declared the European Year (EY) for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, in order to raise awareness of the contribution that older people make to society. It also sought to encourage policymakers and relevant stakeholders at all levels to take action with the aim of creating better opportunities for active ageing and strengthening solidarity between generations.

### **What is active ageing and intergenerational solidarity?**

Active ageing means growing old in good health and as a full member of society, feeling more fulfilled in work, more independent in daily life and more involved as citizens. Intergenerational solidarity refers to mutual support and cooperation between different age groups with a view to increasing social harmony.

The EY 2012 was aimed at contributing to the active ageing agenda and showing that the EU is a strong partner in this regard. The objective was to inspire more determined efforts in all Member States to give older workers better chances in the labour market. It sought to ensure greater recognition of what older people bring to society and create more supportive conditions for them. Active ageing also means empowering people as they age so that they can remain in charge of their own lives as long as possible.

### **SOLIDAR's approach towards active ageing and intergenerational solidarity**

In the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations SOLIDAR and its member organisations together with the EU wanted to raise awareness of the contributions that older people make to society and the role of social service providers.

EY 2012 promoted awareness of the potential that people harbour even at a more advanced age - with a particular emphasis on a bottom-up approach, reaching up to every level, be it European, national, regional or local. No matter how old people are, they can still play an active part in society and enjoy a better quality of life. This is notably the case with regard to the following:

#### **1. Redefining activity in our societies**

---

<sup>1</sup> EU Demography report 2010 'Older, more numerous and diverse Europeans' more info : <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=6824&langId=en>

Even with the raising of pension ages in many countries, older people in Europe will be experiencing much longer periods in retirement than previous generations. Therefore, a new 'life course approach' is needed, which seeks to balance and equally recognise work and the requirements of various societal activities, caring responsibilities and the right to participate in local communities. Volunteering by employees approaching retirement age can help bridge the change of an individual's remunerated activity to a non-remunerated one. It can redefine retirement itself through the development of more flexible opportunities to support volunteering as part of the transition out of the labour market. Thus, our members provide an assessment of career options in later years, organise pre-retirement courses which encourage and support older workers to engage in volunteering. They also support older workers in combining aspects of work with through socially useful activity in volunteering.

Ageing is a gradual process. As such, even long before retirement age is reached, volunteering plays an important role in bringing together different generations and giving individuals a strong sense of purpose in life and remain socially engaged in one form or another. This is even more important with continuing changes in family patterns and reduced intergenerational exchanges. Our members actively promote the development of age friendly communities, support care centres accommodating people of different generations and the multiple needs of support. They also offer housing programmes meeting the needs of older people in need of support to live independently and younger people with disabilities and/or in need of affordable housing.

As the population steadily ages, the number of people with dementia and other chronic diseases will considerably increase all over Europe. People with dementia are significantly exposed to forms of exclusion and discrimination. Our members actively work to create 'dementia friendly' communities. They run projects and campaigns to raise awareness and a better understanding of dementia across generations and to counter the stigmatisation and negative thinking around this kind of illness. They also promote intergenerational activities to support people with dementia and help them to live better lives and to continue to be part of their community.

## **2. Volunteering and later life**

The negative narrative about ageing in our society has to be addressed. A focus on the positive contribution that older people can make to society is needed, which stresses among others the value of volunteering and civic engagement as fundamental to active ageing and solidarity between generations. The state is important in safeguarding social protection and social inclusion, but it is the actions of older people themselves and the non-governmental organisations supporting them, which is also having a decisive benefit. Volunteering addresses the loneliness and isolation experienced by older people, helps to built new contacts and social networks, and can promote the emotional resilience as well as the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of older people. However, volunteering should not be used to replace professional and highly qualified staff providing personal social services to vulnerable groups.

Our members are actively supporting and enabling older people to participate in volunteering, providing a wide range of activities of interest to older people, providing community spaces for volunteer-delivered support and intergenerational contact, developing new forms of support based on mutuality and reciprocity and campaigning to challenge negative attitudes and stereotypes and encourage civic engagement.

## **3. Lifelong learning and adapted work places for older employees**

Stereotypes of ageing are damaging to older people, and reduce their capacity to contribute to society and to live satisfying lives. Promoting lifelong learning is an important aspect of active ageing.<sup>2</sup> It can help older people to participate longer and more effectively in the labour market, should they wish to. Education, training and lifelong learning can also help to increase participation in society as well as to improve the health and wellbeing of older people. If learning is to meet the needs and aspirations of older people, intermediary structures are however needed, to bring together the diverse range of actors in the field (local authorities, adult learning institutions, health and social care agencies, and NGOs) to identify and meet needs and to facilitate learning.

---

<sup>2</sup> The "One Step Up in later life: learning for active ageing and intergenerational solidarity" conference in Brussels resulted in an 11 Point Memorandum, which highlights the benefits learning can bring to active ageing and intergenerational solidarity. The memorandum is available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/memoageing\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/memoageing_en.pdf)

Furthermore, supporting employees' retention in the labour market by providing a welcome opportunity for new experiences can make working life in later years more tolerable. This implies not only developing their skills and capacities through lifelong learning but requires adapting work places and working conditions to their needs. Creative ways need to be found to enable older workers to gradually reduce their work commitments over time until they finally leave paid work, i.e. through part time arrangements, flexible working conditions, and professional conversion programmes.

Against this background, SOLIDAR members are running programmes aimed at adapting the work place and training staff in the social and health care sector with the ultimate aim of retaining the experience of employees. In addition, they support older workers and retired people in the development of their skills and competences by identifying the training and learning opportunities that meet their interests and needs.

## Recommendations

- SOLIDAR voices the concerns of organisations and people all across Europe. We therefore recommend to relevant institutions and stakeholders to **further exploit the profound and widespread expertise of our members in identifying the challenges for our ageing society and include social service providers, education, training and volunteering organisations as important actors in further deliberations on adequate solutions.**
- SOLIDAR calls on all the relevant institutions and stakeholders to work towards safeguarding active and dignified ageing for all people in Europe. It is therefore crucial to **give older people the chance to participate fully in society, to promote job opportunities for older people, to enable older people to actively contribute through volunteer work (often as family caregivers) and to enable older people to live independently** thanks to adapted housing, infrastructure, IT applications and transport.
- SOLIDAR stresses the importance of **accessible, available and affordable quality services for tailored prevention, advice and support services to older people.**
- SOLIDAR recommends an increased attention to and **support of intergenerational initiatives and exchange programmes and fostering cooperation between organisations** which work with children, youth and older people.
- SOLIDAR calls on all the relevant institutions and stakeholders to **support the active ageing of people with dementia and create 'dementia-friendly' communities**, raising awareness across generations.
- SOLIDAR highlights the **need for mechanisms and funding that allow senior volunteer-involving organisations to include the value of senior volunteering in their work** by ensuring European and national level funding.
- SOLIDAR urges **promoting the value of formal and informal lifelong learning as an important aspect of active ageing.** This must include creative ways of enabling older workers to be trained and gradually reduce their work commitments over time until they finally leave paid work.
- **SOLIDAR recalls that younger and older employees should not be played off against each other.** Younger people need to have access to quality employment, education and training. At the same time, retaining or including older employees in employment will have to be accompanied by policies facilitating their access to the labour market, adapting work places and working conditions. Creative ways are required to enable older workers to develop their skills and competences, stay healthy at work and to gradually reduce their work commitments over time until they finally leave paid work. Simply raising the state pension/retirement age for all will have negative effects on the most vulnerable workers, leads to backwash effects in terms of social security and ignores the physical and mental workload in different sectors and easily leads to age-related poverty.