Golden years: Opportunities for Europe’s ageing population

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Europe's population is ageing; by 2040, 155 million people are expected to be over 65. While this demographic change is often framed in a negative light, this can also be seen as an opportunity.

In this Event Report, EURACTIV explores how we can bridge the generational gap and ensure that the older generations remain fit and healthy as engaged citizens and act as ‘unifiers’ to help our society recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.
Healthy ageing and education key to managing ageing populations

By Amalie Holmgaard Mersh | euractiv.com

Policy changes are needed to manage our ageing populations properly, reflecting the diversity of the elderly with more focus on disease prevention and education.

Most EU countries’ retirement age is around the mid-60s, but as populations age as a side effect of people living healthier lives and having access to increasingly better medical treatment, countries are looking at pushing pension reforms and other policy changes. The UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing took place in Rome between 16-17 June, and a joint declaration at the beginning of the event highlighted current challenges and opportunities.

Seen in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which turned the world’s attention to health and the most vulnerable, including elderly citizens, it calls for further measures to support active and healthy ageing.

“Only then we can build inclusive societies, together with younger generations, in which ageing and longevity will be fully appreciated as an opportunity for individual citizens and society as a whole,” the declaration states.

To build a society fit for all ages, it also states that we need to strengthen the “role of older persons by combating ageism and promoting intergenerational solidarity.”

An approach like this could ensure that despite increasingly ageing populations, we are not heading for inevitable economic decline with a significant burden.
on the shoulders of the younger working population.

A report with survey data of 12,850 citizens across 6 European nations further investigating the main aspects of intergenerational solidarity will be unveiled on Tuesday (21 June) in Brussels.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), we need proper policy changes.

They suggest using “untapped reservoirs of productive workers” like migrants and low-skilled and young workers.

Secondly, the OECD highlights that today’s seniors often have both the ability and wish to remain in the labour market for longer.

Lastly, they encourage reforms to boost productivity and strengthen investments in health and education to ensure healthier ageing.

**Solutions through disease prevention and education**

While the EU has dealt with these matters for years – even with a dedicated European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations in the European Union in 2012 – there is still work to be done.

In answer to a parliamentary question about active and healthy ageing as a consequence of demographic change from socialist MEP Sara Cerdas, EU Commissioner for democracy and demography, Dubravka Šuica, said member states “need to take further steps to ensure the sustainability and adequacy of pension systems.”

The Commissioner added, “measures to increase the participation to the labour market of older workers, promote active ageing and raise productivity should be pursued” by member states.

To ensure workers keep updated and stay in the labour market for longer, the EU’s employment and social affairs ministers issued a recommendation after their Council meeting Thursday (16 June), in which they urge member states to strengthen education for working-age adults.

On the other hand, recent calls for more and better investments in health are also surfacing. Many arguments focus on how healthy ageing needs more investment in prevention.

In another parliamentary question, MEP Emmanouil Fragkos from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) expressed concern about the lack of focus on physical activity as a form of disease prevention.

Similar calls have come from different health stakeholders who recently reiterated the need to move prevention to the centre of healthcare.

“The key point is to focus on healthspan and not on lifespan. So maybe we should reconfigure where the intervention with the person creates the most impact. That’s not necessarily very late in the disease trajectory, as we see today,” explained Bogi Eliasen, director of health at the Copenhagen Institute For Futures Studies.
Intergenerational solidarity and fairness need to be the cornerstones and guiding lights for us as a society, particularly for decision-makers, says Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica to EURACTIV.

This must be ensured if we want an increasingly older population to benefit from relations between generations, said the Croatian Commissioner in charge of democracy and demography.

The average age of Europeans is increasing as 155 million people are expected to be over 65 by 2040. For Šuica, this means we need an approach to recognising everyone’s experience and value in society.

“I believe that this is best done by creating conditions where older people actively contribute to societal life, and through this active collaboration, relations between generations will be enhanced,” she said.

According to a new report based on a survey of 12,850 European citizens released by Edwards Lifesciences on Tuesday (21 June), the senior population provides great support in societies by volunteering,
participating in local democracy or helping their family with daily tasks.

The survey shows that 71% of over 65s provide financial support to younger people, while four out of five respondents aged 18-40 say that support provided by older generations is essential.

Despite the clear benefits, the ageing population is often referred to as a ‘demographic challenge’ the report reads, even though their own survey suggests “no such conflict between generations, but a strong desire for more intergenerational interactions.”

“The study suggests that intergenerational interactions are both present in society and valued by all age groups. It's important that policies and strategies are developed that help maintain and strengthen these relations going forward,” George Leeson, professor at the University of Oxford, says in the report.

According to the Commissioner, Europe should look at the whole life-cycle and address all ages to best turn ageing populations’ challenges into opportunities.

This includes promoting healthy ageing, gearing for greater demand for healthcare, sustaining social protection systems, boosting productivity and supporting increasing labour market participation.

“The study shows that we clearly need a mainstreaming of the facilitation of intergenerational relations in many fields of policy, from landscape planning to digitalisation.”

Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic it became clear that everyone was affected by it in one way or another.

Older people were more vulnerable to the virus, and in many places, they experienced a higher rate of isolation as communities went into lockdown or grappled with tough restrictions and soaring case numbers.

According to the report, this had a negative impact on intergenerational interactions, as there were limited opportunities to meet family members and friends during particularly challenging times.

The pandemic appeared to be the main cause of the barriers preventing further interactions between generations for 38% of the respondents, and 40% of those surveyed said the amount of time they spend with people of a different generation to theirs has decreased since the pandemic.

“The coronavirus pandemic exposed many vulnerabilities and showed a lot of our strengths,” Šuica commented, referring to the last two and a half years.

According to her, during the pandemic, Europeans have worked together unprecedentedly to protect and support the most vulnerable in our communities.

This emphasised the importance of and the benefits to the whole of society of strong intergenerational solidarity, Šuica added, and the importance of working together when facing significant challenges.

Despite the adverse effects, the report points to some opportunities to increase the number of options to meet across generations, including suggestions for more physical spaces to meet, higher presence of older people on social media, and intergenerational housing.

“There's a real need to create some physical spaces where all the generations can interact together physically, especially after the pandemic with everyone being isolated from each other for so long,” explained Guillame Fowler, a student at Sciences Po Paris, at the launch event of the report.

For Anna Wanka from the Goethe Institute, the report also shows that intergenerational relations must be incorporated into policy.

“The study shows that we clearly need a mainstreaming of the facilitation of intergenerational relations in many fields of policy, from landscape planning to digitalisation.”
The current digital gap between young and elderly people can offer an opportunity to enable more significant interactions and inter-generational cohesion, according to a recently published study.

Attempts to fill the inter-generational knowledge gap due to more familiarity with the technology of youngsters can create closer connections between the younger and older generations, the study based on a survey of 12,850 European citizens suggests.

Roughly 40% of the surveyed in the older generation would most like to learn new technology and digital media skills from younger people.

Conversely, a similar amount of younger respondents seem keen to share knowledge of digital technology with the older, with the peak percentage reached in Spain (48%), Ireland (44%), and Italy (43%).

The use of digital tools in the lives of older people is becoming critical, according to Jean-Luc Lemercier, corporate vice-president EMEA, Canada and Latin America at Edwards Lifesciences, the med-tech company that released the study.
And the importance of technology falls outside mere communication aspects. “For people aged above 70, exposure to the digital world in their daily life is a reality,” said Lemercier.

According to him, the younger generation will have to support and help the older generation improve their digital skills and learn how to use technology in their daily lives better.

“It’s an important enabler of intergenerational solidarity,” he added.

Intergenerational solidarity involves a better understanding of younger and older people's strengths and what they can offer to society.

“Intergenerational solidarity is about bringing together all ages and recognising the value that they can all contribute to promoting intergenerational cohesion,” said Adrienne McCann, research manager at Innovation Value Institute, Maynooth, who also contributed to the drafting of the report.

According to her, there are a lot of opportunities to link up older and young people in terms of their strengths, particularly when it comes to digital literacy, where older people want to learn how to use technology. At the same time, youngsters know how to do that and can teach them.

“Younger and older people don’t always have the same interests. So, when you are trying to connect the dots there, you can’t expect them to be able to just slot straight in,” she pointed out, hinting at the possibility of the digital knowledge gap becoming an inter-generational bridge.

**Mutual exchange**

The importance of new technologies in enhancing connections in our society has been witnessed during the pandemic, as different generations experienced more isolation from each other if they could not connect via social or digital channels.

“If from an older person’s perspective, especially if they had underlying conditions, there was quite a real fear of getting COVID-19, and therefore not wanting to go outside of their bubble,” McCann said.

She mentioned that in her country, Ireland, older people were cocooned, and they were not allowed to leave their homes, leading to problems in terms of social isolation, mental health issues, and wellbeing.

Both age groups in the survey seem to agree that younger and older people are farther apart since the COVID-19 pandemic.

If the digital realm seemed the only way to connect during the pandemic, developing training programmes on interacting through digital means could now provide new opportunities to promote solidarity.

The report suggests the introduction of schemes which allow senior people to build their digital skills and connectivity as a way to reduce their isolation.

However, this inter-generational exchange is not only unidirectional as there are also activities for older people to share their experiences with younger people.

“The biggest thing [about the survey] was I was seeing how much young people were interested in working with older people there will be a certain cohort of young people that will naturally wish to engage with older people because they’ve had more life experience with maybe grandparents,” said McCann.

But according to her, the report also showed that people who did not have much exposure to older people growing up still look to the older population for guidance, support, and companionship.

While 56% of younger respondents consider being the most important or valuable thing older people can offer to their generation, only 23% of them believe that mentoring schemes currently provided by national or local government would help them to do more with older generations.

“There is a need for policymakers to enhance intergenerational solidarity with proper policy solutions that leverage the expertise, skills, and experience of the third generation. This can create more opportunities for older people to mentor and pass their knowledge on to younger generations,” Edwards Lifescience’s Lemercier concluded.
The European population is ageing – by 2040, it is expected that 155 million people will be aged 65 and over (Eurostat (2017) People in the EU — population projections). This demographic change is often referred to as a burden, giving a misleadingly negative impression of the contribution of over-65s to society.

Jean-Luc Lemercier is the Corporate Vice President EMEA, Canada, Latin America and JAPAC, Edwards Lifesciences.

At Edwards Lifesciences, we believe that this description ignores the considerable benefits that society can gain from an experienced, active and engaged senior population.

In reality, this group play a pivotal role in society as unifiers. This is not just my view; it is what the 12,850 respondents of a Europe-wide survey conducted by Edwards Lifesciences this year as part of the Unifying Generations Initiative indicate. As International Day of the Older Person just ended, it now feels like a pertinent time to reflect on the role

Mentoring and knowledge sharing as enablers of intergenerational cohesion and solidarity

By Jean-Luc Lemercier | Edwards Lifesciences
of senior people in society and the need to enhance intergenerational cohesion, especially in the post-pandemic world.

**Mentoring and knowledge sharing**

There is so much we can learn from our senior population. Survey results reported in the Unifying Generations report indicate that the younger generation have a clear desire to learn from the senior population through mentoring and knowledge sharing. In fact, 56% of younger people state that listening and giving advice is the most valuable thing older people can offer to them. This is followed by sharing historical or cultural knowledge (43%), sharing work experience (28%) and providing educational support such as assistance with homework (19%).

Unfortunately, older people seem to underestimate the value they can bring through mentoring, with only 12% believing that it would be valuable to younger people. In reality, such skills are highly valued by younger people.

‘In Spain, many of the over-65s we support through our organisation are an important source of support for their families and communities. This often goes beyond day-to-day and financial help, with senior people helping to pass on knowledge, advice and skills to generations below them. The results from the survey are positive as they show there is a strong desire for more intergenerational interactions from both younger and older people. Mentoring, listening and coaching are ways that we can help bring these groups closer.” Angel Yagüe Criado, CEO, Spain.

**The digital generation gap**

Mentoring and knowledge sharing should work both ways, and just as the younger generation have much to gain from senior populations, they also have much to share. Across each of the six countries surveyed, 40% of the older respondents said they would like to learn about new technology and digital media skills from the younger generation.

There is an assumed gap, known as the ‘digital generation gap’, between the younger and the older generations due to young people’s ability to adapt to new technologies more successfully than older generations. Bridging this gap, and creating another avenue in which generations can interact, share skills and work together, could be fundamental to increasing intergenerational interactions.

**Create more opportunities for intergenerational mentoring**

So, what can be done? According to our Unifying Generations survey, 23% of younger respondents believe that mentoring or educational schemes provided by national or local government would help them to do more with older generations. A further 14% identified that business advice or mentoring schemes offered by businesses would improve collaboration.

Business, academics, senior organisations and policy makers should work together to create more opportunities for older people to mentor and pass on their knowledge, experience and skills to younger people through educational initiatives.

Furthermore, the pandemic demonstrated that generations can be more isolated from each other if they cannot connect via social or digital channels. The introduction of schemes which allow senior people to build their digital skills and connectivity will reduce their isolation and ensure even greater intergenerational cohesion.

Finally, we need to change the way we look at older people. We need campaigns to communicate a more realistic narrative of the positive, unifying role of senior people and the overwhelming desire for greater intergenerational solidarity.

The Unifying Generations Survey results are in stark contrast to the prevailing narrative of intergenerational conflict and an older generation posing a challenge to society. Instead, the survey gives a clear picture of the pivotal social and economic contribution brought by the senior population, a contribution that is greatly valued by the younger generation. Far from there being conflict between generations, there is compelling evidence of intergenerational cohesion and a wish for greater interactions in the future.

If we can all play a role in correcting perceptions and enabling greater interactions between generations, we can help to create a more cohesive society for people of all ages.

Read our full report [here](#).
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