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Danube Networkers (DANET) As Social Capital Changing Older People's Social Engagement and Integration along the Danube

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What most importantly qualifies me to be with you today? I have been dealing with old age, older people and their issues for thirty-three years now and during this time I have been ageing, which is a qualification in my view. I used to be an Age Platform Europe's expert, I am one of the two founders of Slovenian Third Age University, and currently I am the vice-president of DANET networkers for Europe. As result of it I am experienced with both ageing and organisations dealing with ageing, older people and old age.

(1) Why organisations of older people, for older people or mixed organisations are needed? Do they produce social changes?

Why these organisations are needed and do they make a difference?

Well, they do make a difference in the lives of individual older people and the lives of their family members, they do make a difference in local communities. Our empirical research studies have shown it. But do our organisations change society?

Let me make an unusual comparison perhaps. Only recently I listened to Ester Duflo, a famous economist dealing with the development and poverty on the global national and local level. When she was asked about the impact of development aid on poor countries, if it really helped she said "I have no idea, simply because I have no idea what really triggers economic growth. But I definitely know one thing that the day when this growth happens, poor people should be ready and should be able to get on the train.

Now, where is the similarity? With no organisations dealing with old age, older people and their issues older people would be unable to stay on the current train and they certainly would not be able to get on any new train at all when needed. This would create an impossible situation for them and society as a whole.

But whether our organisations produce social changes, this is impossible to say. We do know that the mode of production changes societies (just think of the transition from machines to computers). So many things have changed. New social groups

have come into power, new values, new policies , new social relationships and in addition to this basic change also numerous major social changes... impacting society and older people.

Let me enumerate only some of the occurring major changes- and I am having in mind not only European countries but also countries globally: rapid urbanisation impacting family relationships, economy of proximity disappearing, changes in the environment impacting the quality of life and there is a change concerning the way we work, there is e-health under way etc. There is robotisation under way. There are newcomers, ours are mobile societies! We have only just entered the early stage of digital society. Now, how can older people construct or reconstruct their identity and live amidst so many changes?

I am now coming to my first conclusion: *Numerous social changes radically transform society and the position of all generations and all social groups that need to reposition themselves. This repositioning cannot be done individually. Social structures and organizations are needed. Social capital is needed. But I doubt our organisations can trigger profound social changes.*

(2) The risk of deepening the lack of social fairness is great, it has to be alleviated.

Moreover, so many changes risk to *deepen the lack of social fairness* everywhere in the world in general and as concerns older people. *There is still socio-economic injustice but there is also cultural social injustice driven by ageism on all levels: socio-economic and distributive level but also cultural and symbolic level.*

One of the arenas that exhibits ageism is labour force market, where women, but also older people suffer discrimination. The problem is *the social justice gap, but also social recognition gap* and humiliation of older identity.

Ageism and humiliation of older identity are well rooted in our culture and consolidated by older people themselves. Older people are described as senile, grumpy, poor thinkers, bad learners and not productive. The consequences of ageism are to be found in all areas:

Health services; medical treatments;
Social Services; guardianship;
Economy; invisibility of older people's contribution;
Intergenerational relationships; older people as burden put on the shoulders of adult children;
Arts;
Ageist advertisements/movies.

My second conclusion: *Our organizations can not impact societies, but they do have the power to transform the mind setting in different cultures. They should have political power too to demand and co-shape policies that will be more just for older people.*

(3) DANET in a nutshell and its impact on older people along the Danube

DANUBE networkers for Europe (DANET) (<http://danube-networkers.eu/>) is a European association, both political and professional organisation based in Ulm, (supported by Baden-Württemberg Foundation), currently uniting 55 organisations from the region. It was founded two years ago upon its president Carmen Stadelhoffers' initiative, originating, however, from a previous long lasting co-operation of a number of partner organisations from the Danubian region. One of the crucial events was the *Qualifying training of participants at Bad Urach* where basic areas of DANET's activities were grounded: scientifically grounded older adult education, older people's social participation and intergenerational dialogue. DANET is definitely in itself a social investment meant to connect people and organisations as well as local communities, through common e-platform, events and projects. DANET addresses people from diverse social, professional and educational backgrounds through a number of initiatives and projects one of them being the project *Tastes of the Danube: Bread, Wine and Herbs*. And Bread on Tour. Its activities are meant to support the Danube Strategy (EUSDR) and its implementation as concerns social development. So far DANET has received two highest European awards.

Third conclusion: There is no social, nor is there economic development possible without people and organisations being interconnected and Danubian countries are naturally connected by the Danube. They share a number of issues which can act as a stimuli towards better co-operation.

Conclusion

Numerous social changes radically transform society and the position of all generations and all social groups that need to reposition themselves. This repositioning, however, cannot be done individually. Social structures and organisations are needed. Social capital is needed. There is no social, nor is there economic development possible without people and organisations being interconnected. Danube Networkers for Europe (DANET) is meant to become important social capital changing older people's social engagement and integration along the Danube.

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