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The Importance of Education for the Effective Participation of Senior Citizens in Community Affairs-Changing Attitudes and Approaches Towards Older People in Europe

SEVIR, Verona, October 24th, 2008

I am here today, I would like to thank the organiser for inviting me, in my quality of an Age, European People's Platform expert dealing with education of older people and different forms of their participation in the society. And I am also at the time representing our organisation The Slovenian Third Age University of which I am the president and which I co-founded back in 1984. It has now grown into a vast national network (38 universities, 21 000 students, over 2000 mentors, over 3000 volunteers).

Both Age and the Slovenian Third Age university welcome the SEVIR Project and its will to encourage education for senior citizens and their participation in community affairs

Now briefly, a few words about Age the European Older People's Platform. AGE is a not-for-profit, voluntary organisation. Membership of AGE is open to European, national and regional non profit organizations. Its aims being (1) to voice the interests of older people in the European Union (2) to promote them and (3) to raise awareness of the issues that concern them most.

Why AGE is needed ? In the European Union we are all affected by decisions taken by its institutions. Their decisions affect our daily life. Therefore AGE is involved in a range of policy and information activities putting older people's issues on the EU agenda. It also supports networking among older people's groups.

Both AGE and The Slovenian Third Age University welcome the SEVIR Project and its successful endeavours in the promotion of active ageing and civic engagement of older people in community affairs.

Introduction

In most western European countries old age posed itself as a political and social issue not before the 50' of the last century. After the second World War Europe was mostly interested in repairing the damages and in the future and younger generations, forgetting about older people.

We are looking today at the new European attitudes towards older people and new European approaches towards participation of senior citizens in community affairs and education associated with it. Many can view education and participation of (older) people in community affairs as a pleonasm. If one wants to take part in decision making processes pertaining to community affairs, one unvoidably has to enrich one's frame of reference, preferably by education or training. One has to have at least at some extent a wider frame of reference than those whom one represents.

What seems a question here, that definitely requires an answer, is what an older representative of his or her peers on community matters should know. In my view, and this seems to be basic, he or she should be above all familiar with values and concepts concerning older people, old age, the style of life of older people, pension schemes, active ageing policy, flex security, etc. He or she should know that older people are not the same, actually they are all different, much more different than the members of the younger generations and cohorts are and therefore he or she should stand for the right to be different. Not all older people are patients, not all older people are poor, not all older people are helpless or functionally illiterate, not all of them are grand mothers and fathers. There are so many stereotypes about older people. Consequently, municipality policy concerning older people is often guided by them and an older representative should take care as not to give in. This is not easy, believe me, since stereotypes about old age are often consolidated by older people themselves.

Being knowledgeable about the position and needs of older people in the past and in the present and possibly in the future is essential.

Comparing the community policies to other policies, it can be said that these policies are much closer to reality, far from all sorts of ideologies, set ideas, national programmes. They are and have to be close to every day life, its joy, sorrow despair or anger. Municipal policies address everybody in the community; different generations, different nationalities, different...

Municipality policy on old age and ageing currently develops mostly in three directions. (1) A permanent dialogue with those who have just retired and are aware of their own old age to come and old age as it is today for those who have been retired for some time. (2) Development of services in close collaboration with families and their neighbourhood. (3) Creation of opportunities for older people to be, on equal basis, a part of the community. Most problems arise with this last field. Why? Because older people are being approached as dependent and in need of help. What about the others?

We are looking this morning also at the communities and are primarily interested in healthy communities those which know that rapid social changes have produced all sorts of inequalities (age, gender, urban, employment etc) and therefore new forms of solidarity are to be invented; communities wanting to be integrative for all social groups and individuals. For that reason it is only natural that different social groups are represented in decision making processes about community matters. *Senior citizens represent in most cases the largest social group within a community and at the same time all others and all other generations and their views on common community issues.* Believe me, this is not always easy.

Why not? The cultural model of the organisation of ages has been changing and this fact seems to be at the origin of the crisis called ageing society and not fragile public finances as we have been told. The model is being changed and relationships among generations are slowly changing along. Not easily, of course, not without frictions. For the active generations in the middle it is far from being easy to accept that in our changing society younger generations are ready to fully participate in the society at a younger age, and that older generations are also willing and ready to take on their part of responsibility for our living in common. Therefore, it is not surprising that the SEVIR project is about older people wanting to get educated in order to participate in community affairs.

However, community matters like employment, education, culture, health, sports, tourism, transport, access to new technologies, local development, active ageing, participation of older people in the community, equal rights and opportunities etc. can not be discussed in isolation,

without attempting to understand the changing position of all generations in our changing societies. Seeking solutions within community and for community should by all means involve a perspective involving all generations .

(1) The changing society

Now, what are the major changes in the society affecting all generations and changing their position as well as their will and need to participate in public and community affairs? Our societies have been undergoing many major so; it is mostly brought about by a change in the way of producing (from machines to computers and modern technology). As a result of it power and wealth are redistributed. New social groups get hold of power and wealth bringing with them their values and priorities, their ways of behaving. As a result of it, changes occur affecting living in community. Some of the major changes older representatives of their peers should have in mind, being:

a/ **Paid work.** Unbalanced public finances reflect the disappearance of the society of »paid work and regular monthly income« Today's forms of work, performed by the current middle generations, differ from the Keynesian times of permanent full-time employment; predominant today are fixed-term job, part-time jobs, home-working, teleworking, grey market economy, alternating periods of employment, education and training)flex security). We are facing a transition from »a civilisation of work and stability « to a period of instability, temporariness and, for many, also diminished prosperity and precarity. The new types of employment tend to affect life and work of older people and their participation in the community affairs. Younger people and older people are today much more concerned with what is going on in the community since they are much more affected by the changes within it.

Occasional paid or voluntary work of older people can end up in new jobs for younger people. Not every work can turn into a full time job. At the beginning an activity is developed step by step. Work can be then performed in the form of occasional activities, occasional paid work. Such work is more easily taken on by older people, since they already have some regular income. On the contrary, for younger people such type of activity would be too risky. Younger people need to have a relatively stable full time job. But initially occasional activities can later be full time jobs for younger people. Older people do not “steal” jobs from younger people, since they take on different types of activities as compared to younger people. *Having a permanent job is hardly a good solution for older people and what is more, they do not want to be fully employed.* The third age has other characteristics than the second age.

The social position of several groups composed of members of younger generations is becoming similar to that of older people. These groups comprise young first-job seekers, unemployed middle-aged persons, the permanently unemployed older workers, people during the interval between one and other fixed-term contract, as well as persons who are unemployable due to their own qualification attainment and skills and pushed to the edge of *society*. *In today's societies, looking for solutions for older people, therefore, means also finding solutions for the above-mentioned groups constituting communities..*

b/ **New technologies** are hardly accessible to all older people; if any members of the community are denied access to modern technology, all generations and the whole community are affected. If they are without access to information they cannot integrate in the community, they cannot keep pace with progress, they can not enter e-economy, e-government, e-education, e-communication, etc. and, *thus, they are more and more dependent on the active working population. Without older people's access to technology communities are less integrative for them.* We wonder whether in

our society dependence on employment can be reduced and a different basis, more in tune with the actual social developments, can be found.

c/ **The urgent need to preserve human and social capital that is being neglected.** Older people are possessors of non tangible, invisible cultural heritage (experiential knowledge, skills, beliefs, customs, etc) that has to be preserved, maintained and passed onto younger generations if the continuity is to be ensured. The overlooked abilities and knowledge of older people form an important part of the human and social capital. Their activation and employment could improve social position of older people, and, in addition, lessen the burden of younger generations. Presently the society is wasting a considerable part of the human capital it used to possess and foster, which is a disaster for the information society, based on knowledge. *Modern states modern communities can preserve and strengthen their vitality mostly through the available human and social capital. Moreover the ageing society is being looked upon as a threat, a failure but it can be looked upon as a success. A success of our civilisation, which it is.*

Namely a fair number of older people with readily available and experientially validated knowledge are now available for the benefit of the community. Moreover, we should not be so much concerned about the decreasing birth rate. On the contrary what we should be concerned about is the »quality« of our children or grandchildren; about how to develop their sensibility, tolerance, resistance to stress, ability to relate and respect the others, their ability to build a community. We should be concerned about their values, knowledge, culture, to sum up about their qualities! Quality seem here to be overriding quantity. We may say so. The quality of our children will help communities survive as well as the quality of older people!

(2) Quality of older people's life – how to maintain and increase human and social capital in today's knowledge based society

From what I have said so far it can be deduced that an integrative community should take care and advantage of the knowledge and abilities of its members, notwithstanding their age. The lack of infrastructural networks enabling older people to get reintegrated into society, leads to their social exclusion and isolation. Where can older people create and maintain their social networks? Where can they get support: material, emotional, support, information, knowledge? Where can they start dealing with community affairs and where from can they participate in the society? What networks of public institutions and organized structures are available to the elderly in today's Europe? Are there real opportunities for them to socialize, opportunities for goal oriented, engaging free-time activities that bring about real individual and social changes, opportunities for learning and for education, are there specialized job centres for older citizens, specialized medical services, geriatric hospital wards, organizations providing voluntary work and training for older people, cultural organizations for older people? How can older people re-enter society, or rather, how can we prevent older people from being excluded? How can they secure for themselves an equal position with that of other generations in the society to be able to live full lives in their later years (a period of 20-30, and more, years? There are many institutions, you will say, addressing and helping different generations and you are right in saying so. But for socially marginalised groups it is- at the start, necessary to have their own institutions. It is not admissible that in many European countries older people's homes are the only institution for older people and the only one they can identify with- and this one represents them in the society. And it clearly embodies helplessness and dependence not the active ageing. Policy makers are mostly concerned with two issues; older people working longer, not leaving the labour market or getting back there and social and health protection of older people. Policies meeting other older people's psycho-social needs and their need to fully participate in the society are less numerous and elaborated.

We expect older people to participate in community affairs. To that purpose we have to think about psycho-social needs of older people about how they can be met; their need for security, belonging, emotions and values, their need to explore and discover new things, their need for beauty and self-fulfillment. These and other needs have to be recognized not only by their partners, family and friends, but also by the local community, municipality and the state. If at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries medical care, nutrition, hygiene and a pension sufficed for social security, in the 21st century this is no longer the case. *The quality of life of each generation, not only the old, depends on the extent to which people's higher psycho-social needs are met.* And participating in the community, being a part of it, having access to it is a need, is a psycho-social need neglected in the policies and hardly understood.

Active Old Age – New Ways for Social Integration

Older people, like anybody else, can become reintegrated in the society only by being active. Experience of many retired people has shown, that they may be more successful when joining new social groups, by getting involved in new activities. It is impossible to list all the activities senior citizens can take on together with other people. Given a bit of support and advice and adequate training/education, every individual can find something he or she would enjoy doing, discover what other people need and what they are willing to accept, identify the things that may become a new challenge for him or her. *The choices and attractions of this period are always very personal.* The time has finally come when one is allowed and able to do what one is fond of and interested in. As an illustration, let us just mention a few possibilities: one can learn how to play a musical instrument, take up performing, painting, exhibiting, researching, translating, one can co-operate with museums, work as an assistant custodian or tourist guide, do voluntary work within an organisation, set up a club or society, take up calligraphy, design websites, write for and read stories to nursery school children, co-operate in the design of the curriculum of local community schools, take care of one's garden or perform gardening services for others, give advice, provide learning and psychological help, instruct younger people and people of his own age, make plans, design, get involved in politics, do voluntary work within an organisation, work with public media, establish a company, write and publish books, or participate in community affairs representing their peers and all other generations. *All activities should, however, have a clearly defined objective and operative plan. For older people to have their position changed within communities and society it is necessary however, to undertake such activities that are goal oriented and can bring about changes.*

With no encouragement from the social environment, with little policy support, no model they could look up to, however, older people tend to sink into a passive way of life, and end up vegetating on the fringe of the society, to which they wish to attract yet other old people. In some European countries it is culturally inadmissible that older people work and older people that are perfectly able and want to go on working adapt and leave their work. They get more and more absorbed in themselves, in their own feelings and well-being, and thus they are less and less interesting to other people. Since many human psycho-social needs cannot be met outside relationships based on the give and receive principle, they are bound to become socially excluded and increasingly dissatisfied. Withdrawn from public life, they spend their days watching TV and reading newspapers, meeting with peers in coffee shops, nourishing the illusion that they are part of the society, or they become tourists, travelling around as nicely wrapped-up packages, passing time aimlessly in an unstructured way. They do nothing for the benefit of the community in which they live and become less and less noticeable to other people.

So, where can older people learn how to plan and structure their lives, to fill them with content meaningful to them and the community? How can they set for themselves new goals and find a new sense of life? How can they learn

about representing their peers and different generations in the field of community matters? These questions could be addressed by community policies and educational programmes.

Older People and New Technologies

We are all afraid of the unknown, perceiving it as a threat. Because of the rapid technological changes, the amount of the unknown is increasing daily for everyone, but this process is taking place even faster after retirement. Where can older people gain knowledge about new technologies and for what purposes can they use them? How will new technologies become part of their lives? Only if given the opportunity to familiarize themselves with them, will they be able to outgrow their rejection of technical innovations. As things are, many of them feel ill at ease when hearing people mention the portal, forum, chat-box, e-mail, website, SMS, the intelligent house, or perhaps doing telebanking or public administration services via internet.

Where and how? Are cyber-café's the only solutions? Maybe some other facilities should be made available for older people? Have any programmes been developed for mentors in this field? Can older people create new technologies by the »snowball effect« or »each one teach one« methods, or in some other ways?

New communication technologies and technological literacy are most closely connected with socially organised work. Retirement brings an end to the access to new technologies through one's job. *Participating of older people in community affairs should be based on using purposefully new technologies*

Is new technology financially accessible to the older generation, if not, what can be done about it? The costs of a computer, internet fees, digital camera are just some of the expenses connected with modern technology. Can we think of solutions, suitable for older people? What benefits would it bring to the society if all older people could use new technologies? Or shall they simply be denied access to it? Is life without modern technology possible in a society based on it? Is such a situation not potentially dangerous for other generations as well?

Older people should be reasonably well off as to participate in community affairs

Older people can not be expected to participate in community affairs regarding the whole community if they are not treated equally if they are not encouraged or even allowed to work or stimulated to take up the function of a representative. *Financial stability of a State is safeguarded if individual social groups are made independent to the maximum possible extent and financed at the minimum possible extent. Older people's work benefits society, since, it also contributes to preservation and growth of the badly needed human capital.*

Older People in the World of Knowledge, Culture and Art

Gustav Jung said that older people act as interpreters of culture, making it possible for a culture to survive. What does participation of older people in education, culture, science and art mean for the society as a whole and for older persons in particular? How does it contribute to the quality of older persons' lives and those of other generations?

Research indicates that people's interests begin to change in the early fifties, shifting from the material to the more spiritual domains. In the course of their lives these people have managed to acquire the basic material goods, they have built their homes and brought their children to the

point of financial independence. Now they are becoming increasingly interested in knowledge leading to personal growth and social integration. They wish to explore, reset and write, they begin to study and educate themselves, they visit libraries, go to concerts more often than they used to, take up a musical instrument they used to play and join a band. They get organized, search for their roots, explore the history of the locality in which they live. After retirement they finally allow themselves to satisfy the secret ambitions they have been nurturing for a long time.

Older persons are keen to get to understand interpersonal relations, communication, literature, history of art and local history, all types of artistic expression.

They enjoy the challenge of proving themselves in a new field, which leading to self-fulfilment. Fulfilled people, people whose higher needs, including their cognitive needs, are satisfied, tend to open up, surpassing the preoccupation with themselves and their own well-being, establishing connections with other people and passing knowledge on to them. The knowledge accumulated by the old does not end with them, but flows down to all other generations. Furthermore, by acquiring new knowledge – often widely different from that of their own profession – old people keep up their self-respect and respect for others.

Older people are eager investigators of local environment, which often results in co-operation with museums or establishment of their own research groups. Research projects in the scientific institutions employing young researchers tend to be directed internationally, whereas local environments often remain neglected. A great many people, however, are eager to learn about their immediate surroundings. Studies conducted by older people are - once published - usually well received and taken up with enthusiasm by general public.. Ordinary people prefer tend to prefer this type of studies to those dealing with the more remote phenomena, since they are easier to understand; as such, they are a useful means in the fight against functional illiteracy, which tends to be rather high among older persons. Local surveys and studies are also a significant means of promotion of cultural tourism and economy, of local educational and cultural institutions.

Theatrical activities tend to spread to rural areas mostly through older people. Animating the spirits and rejoicing the hearts in the monotonous residential settlements, they offer local people the opportunity to meet and get to know each other. One marvels at the scripts and acting skills, knowing that writing and performing never entered the minds of these performers in the course of their working lives.

(3) Community versus individualism

Discussing participation of older people in community affairs means discussing the idea of community, civic engagement and solidarity among members of the community as opposing individualism.

The idea of community is related to the search of belonging in the insecure conditions of modernity. The revived popularity of community today has been seen as a response to the crisis of solidarity that has been exacerbated and at the same time induced by globalisation and new concepts of working. Communities have been based on ethnicity, religion, class, or politics, territory, cultural heritage, interests, etc. *Communities have been based on what people have in common and not on what their differences are.* Communities may be large or small they may be bound with thick or thin attachments. They may be locally based and globally organised: they can be affirmative or subversive of the established order; they may be traditional, modern or even post modern, reactionary or progressive. The nature of community is a creation of its members. It can

not be imposed. Cohen(1985) argues that community is to be understood more as a symbolic structure than a social practice. It has shifted attention from traditional community as form of social interaction based on a locality to a concern with meaning and identity. .

Moreover, local community has its actors; the vision of local development is to be agreed upon and promoted with their help. These are individuals, especially the most active and visible ones, local groups, societies and other non-governmental organisations, public institutions, companies, municipality.etc. What do they have in common? Community affairs, which by definition are public affairs of general interest. As they concern everybody in the community, access to them should be made possible. Community affairs require civic engagement and democratic citizenship that is understanding and respecting the interdependence of what is going on in a community and consequent acting. Civic engagement could be defined as a way of relating to others.

Throughout history relating to others, belonging to a community has been a way to protect ourselves against hardships and the way to have met our need for recognition, the need to shape our identity, to build ourselves into human beings. But, the greater our autonomy and freedom, the less we feel indebted to anterior generations and the less we are sensible to the fate of future generations, the less we are ready to redistribute what we have to the deprived. Consequently, solidarity and cooperation among generations in different sectors within a community, as a social contract are to be re-evaluated within our modern society: society that has been facing a fair number of interruptions and inequalities and that requires our active civic engagement.

Aristotle in Hannah Arendt's work *On Human Condition* argues that there were three ways of living that could be freely chosen from. The fourth way of living was not really living it was more surviving. The fourth way of living was the one which was not chosen freely the one typical of slaves who had to work and also the one of traders and craftsmen. But the three freely chosen ways of living were related to beautiful and not really useful things; but they were also consecrated to public affairs of the polis. This way of living required qualities of the citizens of the polis and this way of living was called "vita activa". It can be deduced that active citizenship in a community should be related to beauty, to higher psycho-social needs and should be related to public and community affairs.

(4) Education in later life for voluntary participation in community affairs

Education for voluntary participation in community affairs starts with education for democratic citizenship. It can be carried out through enlightenment or through engagement, or both.

Education for senior citizens representing their peers (civic engagement, active citizenship, democratic citizenship) can start by enlightenment but it can also start by doing and experience of civic engagement in different fields and by acquiring basic concepts. Thus senior citizens should acquire philosophy of old age. sound theoretical basis for understanding the needs and issues of older people in Europe.

In order to understand community and community affairs older students could start by studying theory about local space and its relationship with people, community of people living in it. etc. This could help them taking more sound decisions later on.

Sustainable development means that what already exists is preserved and that simultaneously from it stems what is new. Space in which a human community lives is a whole. Senior citizens

representing their peers on community matters should therefore learn not only about institutions and their functions within their community, but also acquire knowledge about the space and theoretical understanding of the space. Branislav Krstić (1982, str.14) argues the space encompasses:

- Natural environment as a source and as a condition for living creatures to survive,
- Natural environment as a source and place for man's dwelling and for his activities.
- Cultural environment as a frame and expression of Man's material and intangible culture, of his past, present and future,
- Political and administrative environment as a form of political and territorial social organisation (town, municipality, region, State)
- Legal aspects of the relationships within space (the right to enjoy the space and to use it as well as local living conditions)

The way interventions are made in space should take into account the fact that space is unique and specific as well as a whole. The space is managed by the community and its representatives who are guided by the values of the community.

Senior citizens are to be, or can be educated for democratic citizenship having the following objectives: (1) enabling everybody, from school children, young adults, to adults and older adults to personally experience democratic functioning (2) moral education of the citizens, since democracy is a set of values (3) transmitting knowledge and skills and constructing competencies for active participation (4) integrating socially excluded groups in the society and achieving an integrative society (5) engaging citizens in local development and building local capacity (6) empowering citizens (7) building up the local/national community and its identity (8) struggling against low functional literacy (9) supporting lifelong and life wide learning and education.

Democratic competencies can be best acquired through non-formal education ie. forums of citizens, discussion groups in neighbourhoods, public round tables, lectures, seminars, workshops carried out within non-governmental organisations, local communities, third age universities, folk universities and generally in all interested organisations where civic education is experienced as a joint way of learning, doing and living.

Moreover democracy is a value and it requires skills knowing that knowledge alone could not lead to action. Therefore the value of democracy can be developed owing to the didactics of values based on argumentation, rigorous thinking, dialogue and discussion. Further, democratic competencies can be developed within communities: family, school, church, associations, local communities, through media, through working in political parties, etc.

Active citizens can be formed by means of *civic instruction* offering description and presentation of the city and its institutions, *education of citizens* about democratic values, and *political education* which is about underlying the importance of choice and preparing the citizens to taking decisions. Active citizens should be educated stimulating their readiness to act and developing the values they will need to undertake actions. The general aim is to make citizens aware of their interdependency, and of the interdependency of their issues. For that reason cooperation among generations is needed.

Conclusion

Cooperation of generations and solidarity among generations is possible only when senior citizens can age actively. Active ageing can be best and in the fastest way introduced through

voluntary work of older people. This can contribute to the quality of life of all generations and to the development of the civil society. In our complex and changing society older people need knowledge in order to meet professional criteria in voluntary work and enlightened community policies providing for structures and opportunities for older people to learn and be actively involved in a community.

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