

"THE ROLE OF THE ELDERLY IN AN AGEING SOCIETY"

**Resolution made by the European Senior Citizens' Union
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**Also a political contribution for the EU states in implementing
the European Constitution**

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Section A

Growing old in Europe in the 21st century: A challenge for the individual and for society.

"Our life expectancy depends on our lifestyle. Life expectancy is meant here in the broadest sense of the word and therefore means not only the length but also the quality of life – it is not simply a matter of how old one grows but how one grows old".

Growing old in Europe takes many shapes and differs in every country and in every region. Even within one and the same country we find many forms of growing old. Ageing is not just a biological process but a process influenced by biological, social, ecological, psychological and epochal factors. Even within the same country, there are vast differences between contemporaries - differences which are sometimes greater than those between people who have a 10 or 20-year age difference.

Growing old nowadays, at the beginning of the 21st century, is completely different from growing old at the beginning or in the middle of the last century.

These days many more people reach the age of 60, 80 or even 100. Our lives have changed and in many respects everyday life has become easier. On the other hand everyday life today has also become more difficult and more hectic.

Better education and training, foreign language skills, better health - these typify today's older generation in comparison with the senior citizens of previous generations. We are living in a time of rapid technological change where those things which are hailed today as the greatest innovations are already out of date or "out" tomorrow. Many of those things which we are promised today for the future will tomorrow be things of the past. And these changes are moving with ever increasing speed in the 21st century.

A 17-year-old who learnt a trade or trained for a profession back at the beginning of the last century and who then built on that training through many years' employment, could still be using those things he had learnt when he was 70 years old. Nowadays

people assume a **"half-value time" of only five years**, meaning that the value of those things that they have "learnt" will have depreciated by 50 per cent after only five years.

Lifelong "learning" – defined in the broadest sense as "changes in behaviour brought about by experiences" – has become virtually essential to existence in our fast-moving times. We have to learn for a whole lifetime longer – and "differently" – than was demanded of our grandparents and great-grandparents, **because we have to grapple with the changes happening around us more frequently with ever increasing speed**, and we have to adapt.

But rather than simply moaning, we also see the benefits of the technological revolution which often **saves us heavy physical work.**

In **vocational life** too – from agriculture and trades right through to industry, economics and administration – technological developments have **speeded up** and **relieved the burden of heavy physical work.** Occupationally, there is a development from "muscle work" to "brain work", where muscle work is subject to the ageing process, unlike "brain work" - as long as the mind is trained throughout life. Here too the **necessity of lifelong learning** comes into sharp focus.

All these changes present a challenge for each individual. Today lifelong learning has virtually become a necessity. Nor are elderly people immune - forced to keep learning new things and to adapt, they have to master the computer and learn how to surf the Internet in order to be able to communicate with everyone else in the world around them.

Elderly people are often talked about as a burden in society. Almost every day the newspapers talk about "the burden of pensions", "the burden of care", and rising costs in our health system blamed on increasing longevity. Yet this image of elderly people varies in the different European countries.

The image of old people and those advanced in years is very complex in every culture – on the one hand there is the competent and wise senior citizen who is integrated in society and has a relatively high standard of living, and on the other hand

there is the helpless, ill, dependent senior citizen, maybe even in need of permanent care, who has to rely on his or her children and relatives or even on social welfare benefits.

Conclusion: Growing old is something that has to be learnt; only then can it be accepted to the benefit of the individual and society

Section B

Demographic change and the discussion on inter-generational justice

Since 1992 demographic change has increasingly been a topic of discussion in the European countries following the analysis of much data.

As a general rule demographic change is discussed in the following areas:

- social security systems,
- family and social networks,
- the employment market and the economy,
- migration and integration

with the aim of collecting data and making forecasts.

It is widely acknowledged that the area of social security is a particular challenge and a very hard problem to solve. There is a shortfall for pensions, health insurance and long-term care insurance. In the public domain this is virtually exclusively attributed, by way of simplification, to demographic change or "our ageing society" and increasing longevity (one even hears of "longevity risk") and – however explicitly or subtly the message is put across - the blame is laid at the door of the ageing population amid complaints about "the burden of old age", "the burden of pensions" and "the burden of care".

Elderly people are branded as the "scapegoats of the nation" who have caused the dilemma. This is particularly noticeable when, for example, demands ring out from professors to exclude those 75 years of age and older from certain medical services, such as dialysis, etc.

Information on demographic change and the increase in the proportion of elderly people in our country are often cited as an excuse for suspending our social security systems.

This is a very unbalanced view.

The demographic change is taking place in a time of **structural changes**, in a time of **economic transition**, rapid **technological and social upheaval**, and also in a time of **shifting values**, which have to be made partly accountable for the lower birth rates.

The **prolongation of youth and the bringing forward of old age** despite improved health and competence leads to a shortening of active middle age.

The shortfall in pensions should be accounted for in part by the lack of contributions from younger people – and of course also by the lack of contributions from many older people capable of working but **who cannot find work on account of the current employment situation**. In 2001 only 36.8 % of all 55-64-year-olds in Germany were in paid employment, compared with just under 70 % in Norway and 67.1% in Switzerland and Sweden, for example. **Many 55-year-olds and older people would gladly pay into the pension pot rather than drawing from it if only they had work. It is therefore not primarily a demographic issue but an economic one!**

Conclusion: Both factors together – starting work later and finishing earlier – lead to a considerable strain on social welfare funds. In this respect demographic change is only one factor, albeit an important one, affecting the future viability of the welfare state. Other factors, which can be entirely shaped by policies, play at least an equally important role, such as

- an economic policy which creates work,
- an education policy whereby shorter training times lead to qualifications which are in demand on the employment market, and
- ongoing human resources planning with in-service training interspersed at regular intervals in order to retain older employees in working life instead of making them "redundant" and thus squandering human capital.

"Inter-generational justice" – a vague term?

The call for "inter-generational justice" crops up in all political discussions these days.

But what is "inter-generational justice"? It is almost exclusively discussed in connection with financial aspects.

When we talk about "**inter-generational justice**", we want to consider aspects other than that of financial burden. Biographical studies of men and women who were born in the first four decades of the last century, i.e., the over-sixties, actually show **great deprivation among the older generation**. The times in which they grew up were far harder than today. Poverty, lack of opportunity and sacrifice run like a thread through many accounts of life in those days. **Education opportunities were limited** – and not just for women! Even apprenticeships had to be paid for out of one's own pocket. Many of today's pensioners worked for 45 years – only very rarely will the younger generation of today manage that long! The older pensioners still remember the 60-hour week and certainly the 48-hour and 45-hour week! For them Saturday was just another full working day.

Inter-generational justice is therefore not only taking account of past and present, but in our view solidarity practised between the generations.

It is about give and take – but for all generations.

Therefore solidarity between the generations is the unmistakable cry for dialogue between the generations aimed at suppressing generation gap conflicts!

Our definition of inter-generational justice:

Solidarity between the generations instead of generation gap conflicts: mutual understanding is required!!

While we may detect many kinds of changes in family situations, nevertheless solidarity between the generations cannot be doubted in the family environment. Generation gap conflicts in families have decreased rather than increased in the last few decades. If we analyse spontaneous life accounts of those born between 1890 and 1925, we find far more frequent conflicts arising in all stages of life with parents than is the case with those born in later years. Those in our study born from 1930-1932, and certainly those born between 1950-1952, describe far fewer disagreements with their parents and also with their children. Financial and material dependency is far less common; commands and prohibitions are far less pronounced or seen as less relevant to people's lives, and the trust between grandparents, parents and children is stronger than ever before. There is a repeated emphasis that people can talk to one another about anything – even about sexuality and religion.

The relationship between the generations concerns not just material things, but mutual respect, recognition, the reciprocation of responsibility and mutual tolerance of diversity. And this is far more widespread than people assume and than many surveys designed to investigate the problems would have people believe (such as the 1997 SHELL Youth Survey which only asks about conflicts and burdens and completely lacks positively articulated items). Press, radio and television know how to repeatedly present living together as a family as outdated, unattractive and out of step with the times, whereas in reality, "The analysis of the parent-child relationship shows that both the individuals and the different generations are to a great extent developing activities to help one another in cases of need, to support one another and to stay in touch with each other" (KOHLI, 1996, 20 ff). There are therefore strong feelings of solidarity which reduce the potential for conflict between the generations. This gives rise to a dual task for politics – to take a matter-of-fact look at the potential for conflict and to refrain across the board from anything which would unnecessarily overstate the conflict. Politics in an ageing society is politics for all ages and it must

include the existing feelings of solidarity between the age groups and generations. This (entirely present) solidarity is a capital which must not be squandered".

Conclusion: The public debate about "inter-generational justice" should not just be about credits and debits, benefit points and percentages, thus stirring up conflicts between the generations in public. Instead it should be based on a broader all-embracing view of the respective chances and opportunities and the particular burdens and challenges of each generation, thus contributing to mutual understanding and greater solidarity between the generations.

Section C

Strong senior citizens – Secure future

Medical progress, a different awareness of health, a higher level of education and a rising standard of living mean that in Europe people will spend at least one third of their lives as older people. Politics, economics, society and those actually affected must be prepared for this. Many decision-making bodies and the public at large have not yet undergone the change in outlook needed to face the challenges and opportunities associated with this development. The ESCU sees its task as giving impetus and clear direction in these matters as well.

Generational policy and senior citizens' policies need a clear strategy in future to be able to turn demographic challenges into social and individual opportunities.

Conclusion: The ESCU wishes to formulate this strategy and implement it in economics, politics and society in order to safeguard our future!

Section D

"Senior citizens' list of promotional measures"

The ESCU hereby asks the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament to organise in law the insights arising from the discussion on the generations and from the solidarity felt between the generations in a list of measures which meets the demands for inter-generational justice.

This includes the following demands in particular:

1. Legal protection of voluntary activity, and above all by creating effective insurance protection for accident and liability.
2. Compulsory inclusion of representative bodies of elderly people (e.g., senior citizens' advisory boards) in the enactment of regulations affecting them and in connection with local laws of the countries in resolutions on matters concerning them.
3. Obligation upon the (local) agencies responsible for assistance for the aged to carry out, with involvement of the senior citizens' advisory boards, planning for assistance for the aged which must be projected forward.
4. Creation of a right for elderly people to individual advice by way of creating an individual assistance plan (case management) for those needing long-term care, whereby outline provisions guarantee the co-operation of free and public assistance for the aged.
5. Obligation upon the public agencies to check, prior to assigning an elderly person to an in-patient institution for permanent care, whether it may be possible for them to stay in their familiar environment through the adoption of, e.g., rehabilitation measures, home supervision arrangements or short-term care.

6. Creation of a (legal) basis for compiling statistics on assistance for the aged.
7. Obligation upon reporting on old people to take greater account of the specific problems of elderly people with dementia.
8. Increased consideration of the needs of people with dementia in care insurance.

Conclusion: New fundamental legislation must be created which is based on a contemporary picture of age and which assumes primarily the competence and independence of ageing people and provides help only to the extent required. The involvement of elderly people in the life of the community should also be promoted in the light of, and precisely because of, the increasing need for help. Knowledge and experience should be usable for society.

This would not be a new law on benefits but a framework for detailed European legislation which would summarise the legal and professional requirements for assistance, service and institutions in such a way that these can be made more easily accessible to senior citizens.