



Brussels, 1 June 2009
D(2009) 8107

Questionnaire for a consultation in view of a possible designation of 2012 as European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity

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Should this contribution be published anonymously? No

1. IDENTITY OF THE RESPONDENT

Please identify yourself and the organisation on behalf of which you are replying to this consultation

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2. THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF AGEING IN RELATION TO INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Please explain briefly how your organisation perceives the challenges and opportunities in relation to intergenerational solidarity in a context of accelerating demographic ageing.

The phenomenon of unprecedented ageing of European societies goes far beyond mere demographic calculations. There is now a significant number of data and analyses concerning the economic impact of ageing, especially in the area of employment and in

the organisation of social security systems. The research and studies conducted by numerous organisations and bodies provide a rich and valuable basis for policy makers.

However, apart from its grave economic consequences, ageing poses a whole range of social, cultural, and psychological questions. The Catholic Church, while mindful of the relevance of the economic perspective, would in addition draw attention to other aspects relating to the social and psychological impact of ageing on the future development of European societies. The Church has referred to ageing and to the dignity of older persons on many occasions (e.g. *The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World*, Pontifical Council for the Laity, 1998, published on the occasion of the UN International Year of Older Persons 1999, and the Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Elderly, 1999).

Consequently, the present contribution is primarily aimed at the social and psychological impact of ageing on intergenerational solidarity.

THE VALUE OF OLDER AGE

Despite the fact that people now live longer and healthier, there still persists a widespread negative perception of older age. This stereotype does not take into account the fact that older people are not a homogenous group and that older age is experienced in many different ways. To many people it is a traumatic experience to which they react with resignation, rejection and despair. Many others are capable of confronting older age with serenity and dignity and find new opportunities and challenges. They do not submit themselves to resignation but rather they acknowledge the alternative value of their current stage of life.

Older people are not a 'special needs' group with their own problems. In fact they are ourselves, only some years later. Therefore they should be seen as rightful members of society. In order to build a coherent multigenerational society one should acknowledge respect for all phases of life and have a positive perception of older age. Older age should be seen as inseparable from the dignity of each person, which is consequently the same from conception to natural death and does not vanish or diminish as people grow older and their physical status deteriorates. Affirmation of the dignity of a human person in his or her entirety should be reflected in political actions, accompanied by programmes aimed at preparing all people to become older, to teach them the ability to adapt to ever faster changes in life, in technologies, and in work.

THE ROLE OF OLDER PERSONS IN SOCIETY

One of the greatest opportunities in relation to intergenerational solidarity is to acknowledge the fact that older people bind social life with a sense of continuity, as they constitute a 'living memory' of history. Younger generations, especially in times of increasing multiculturalism and globalisation, are losing a sense of their identity and of historical continuity. Other aspects relate to interpersonal relations. A human person is a relational being. However, there is today a growing individualism and a search for independence. Older people, in their search for companionship, draw attention to the social nature of man. They also remind a busy and overworked society of the need to overcome indifference and egocentrism. The value of volunteering is therefore crucial in sustaining intergenerational solidarity. Many older people have enough physical and mental energy to devote their time to the various activities and programmes of the voluntary services. And those who no longer have the possibility of participating in volunteering or other activities can contribute to the common good and the development

of moral culture by offering an example of dignified ageing and a struggle to overcome their elderly sufferings. The solidarity of the young members of society towards older people should be expressed in the companionship that the young are able to offer to the old, always conscious that every personal relationship is reciprocal and is an opportunity for both parties to enrich their understanding of their humanity.

THE NEED FOR INCLUSION

One of the greatest problems is the marginalisation and exclusion of older people, which can occur in many ways. Poverty or a reduction in the income necessary for securing a decent standard of living and appropriate levels of care lead to the gradual exclusion of older people from a social environment. Additionally, older people suffer from abandonment, loneliness and isolation. As their interpersonal and social contacts diminish, they are deprived of intellectual and cultural stimulus. Such marginalisation violates human dignity. Furthermore, prejudices such as valuing human life by the standards of youth, efficiency, physical strength, full health and beauty, should be countered. Presenting 'euthanasia' as an answer to the diminished quality of life and a solution to deteriorating physical health cannot be supported. One of the ways of dealing with the problem of exclusion is to help older people to actively participate in social life and encourage them to share their experience, wisdom, and knowledge.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LIFE

The family is the first and most natural example of intergenerational solidarity, where members commit themselves to each other and share in the fruits of that commitment. Families, however, are experiencing demographic, cultural and socio-economic changes with implications for intra-familial relationships. This brings both challenges and opportunities to multi-generational relationships. In the future, the family will be for the majority of people a very small 'community'. This will be an important aspect of increasing loneliness. Therefore policies favouring a child-friendly environment, but also policies aimed at fighting against the negative stereotype of families with many children and supporting these families could be an important and helpful instrument in building a society of intergenerational solidarity. In a large family, where there are many children, grandchildren, cousins, uncles, etc., inter-personal relations are more easily built, the feeling of loneliness tends to be replaced by mutual support, people learn how to share what they have and rely on each other.

In the context of demographic challenges building up community ties can also, after family ties, facilitate multi-generational relationships. Communities of special interest, such as organisations of elders or of youth, can establish new relationships for addressing community concerns such as safety, environmental protection, cultural enrichment, income-generation and others. Such communities can also facilitate communications between younger and older generations, particularly in discussions about new and older technologies and new and traditional lifestyles. The creation of associations for older people should be encouraged, and those already existing should be supported.

3. POLICY MEASURES REQUIRED TO AVERT SUCH THREATS OR EXPLOIT THE OPPORTUNITIES AND HENCE PROMOTE INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

What policy measures would your organisation recommend to preserve or promote intergenerational solidarity? What obstacles need to be overcome to implement such policies; in particular, is there a lack of awareness and resistance to change?

The Secretariat of COMECE recommends that policy measures aimed at safeguarding and promoting intergenerational solidarity should contribute towards

- A) Fostering the active participation of older people in family, social and societal life;
- B) Preserving the autonomy of older people; and
- C) Promoting a positive image of ageing.

A) Fostering the active participation of older people in family, social and societal life

Notwithstanding the decisive role of parents in managing family life and, in particular, educating their children, policy-makers should value the important complementary role that grandparents can play in this respect. In particular, grandparents can help parents to cope with the twin challenges of a professional career and the education of children. They can offer to grandchildren their time, attention and love. In order to allow grandparents to assume this role more actively, policy-makers should consider offering working grandparents, who are approaching retirement and who are willing to take care of their grandchildren, grandparental leave of up to two years. The possibility of granting a ‘grandparental leave allowance’ to be financed by the corresponding savings in the childcare facilities sector should be examined.

Furthermore, decision-makers should ensure the best possible participation of older people in social and societal life. In particular, they should enable and encourage them to serve the common good with their knowledge and experience. The following policy measures could contribute to this objective:

- Decision-makers should support initiatives favouring exchanges and mutual assistance between the generations. Partnerships between schools and elderly people’s homes could encourage older people to carry out voluntary work in schools (as homework supervisors, study and professional career advisers, etc.), without, however, replacing paid employees. On the other hand, young pupils could dedicate time to visiting the homes of elderly people.
- Older people wishing to work as volunteers should be able to obtain the best available information and assistance. Policy-makers should therefore recognise the work of volunteer agencies, especially those allowing older people to find a volunteer position best fitted to their talents and interests. They should, for example, support non-profit initiatives setting-up user-friendly Internet databases for elderly volunteers.
- Decision-makers should consider granting tax exemptions for expenditures related to voluntary work (e.g. transport expenditures, etc.) as well as public insurance protection for volunteers (which already exists in some EU Member States).
- In order to promote active ageing, older people seeking to work as volunteers in another EU Member State should benefit in the most efficient and user-friendly way from

European exchange programmes (such as the GRUNDTVIG Initiative on Volunteering in Europe for Seniors which started in 2009).

B) Preserving the autonomy of older people

The preservation of the autonomy of older people should be encouraged by, inter alia, the following policy measures:

- Policy-makers should contribute towards a positive image and constructive vision of the institutions of marriage and family, thus creating favourable conditions for familial stability which will also benefit the older family members;
- Whereas there has been much debate on how to improve the balancing of work and family life of working parents with small children, the needs of persons struggling with caring for elderly family members have not yet attracted comparable policy attention. Often, those who decide to give priority to the care of older family members are excluded from employment or career prospects. In the majority of cases this affects women. Policy-makers should therefore support those who wish to take care of their elderly parents. To this end, a right to temporary part-time employment for persons taking care of their elderly parents should be established in all Member States. This right should be accompanied by certain guarantees, such as the right to return to full-time employment. The payment of a compensatory social allowance could ensure a stable income during the period of care. This measure could be financed by corresponding savings in the long-term care sector.
- Best practices regarding pension, health and (long-term) care systems should be reviewed with the aim of granting a life of dignity to older people who have insufficient financial resources.
- A family- and child-friendly environment should be created through family-friendly policies both in the EU and the Member States, in order to encourage parents to have children. This will be indispensable in order to ensure the sustainability of social security systems based on the principle of solidarity between the generations.
- In some European countries young adults may carry out a Civilian Service or a Voluntary Social Year instead of performing their military service. During this period many young adults work in institutions taking care of the elderly. While conscription no longer exists in many EU Member States, there should be an evaluation as to whether the establishment of a voluntary Civilian Service and/or a Voluntary Social Year at national and/or European level could be an option for putting into practice the principle of intergenerational solidarity.
- Social housing policies should enable several generations of a family to live together under the same roof, thus contributing to preserving the autonomy of the older generations.

C) Promoting a positive image of ageing

Policy-makers should support and increase the visibility of non-profit initiatives promoting a positive image of ageing, including initiatives led by Christian Churches having a longstanding tradition in this field. Organisations carrying out these activities should enjoy the strongest political support. Taking stock of the numerous initiatives at

EU level will, moreover, allow the identification of the best communication practices and examples to be shared among all EU Member States.

Decision-makers (many of whom themselves are from the older generation) should also lead public communication campaigns in order to enhance the public image of ageing.

4. ROLE OF THE EU IN PROMOTING THE RIGHT POLICY RESPONSES

Is there a specific role for the EU in relation to intergenerational solidarity? What measures could be taken at the level of the EU in addition to the existing EU policies? In particular, is a European Year an appropriate instrument?

Although the EU has limited competences in the field of social policy, the open method of coordination provides it with a useful tool to tackle the issue of active ageing and intergenerational solidarity. The EU therefore has a specific role to play. In particular, the EU should:

- Review national policies concerning pension, health and (long-term) care systems, and social housing with the aim of defining and exchanging best practices in the EU;
- Recommend EU minimum standards for the management of old-age dependency;
- Initiate a consultation among European social partners on the idea of a Directive on Grandparental Leave;
- Highlight and reward volunteer initiatives which help older people to participate in social and societal life;
- Review national policies concerning tax benefits and public insurance protection for elderly volunteers with the aim of defining and exchanging best practices in the EU;
- Continue with the GRUNDTVIG Initiative on Volunteering in Europe for Seniors, and consider developing further EU exchange programs for older people;
- Support setting up a Civilian Service and a Voluntary Social Year in all Member States and evaluate the possibility of creating a European Civilian Service and a European Voluntary Social Year at EU level;
- Pursue an active communication policy both at Member State and EU levels in order to promote a positive image of ageing. In 2012, two major European sports events – the Olympic Games in London and the European football championship in Poland and the Ukraine – offer excellent opportunities for a European-wide communication campaign on the role of sports in active ageing. Moreover, the integrative power of sports and the volunteer opportunities which the sports sector offers to elderly people could be highlighted.

The Secretariat of COMECE believes that dedicating the year 2012 to the issue of active ageing and intergenerational solidarity could be an effective awareness-raising tactic. It could help local and regional communities and organisations, Member States, and the EU itself in achieving the aforementioned objectives. However, it would seem essential that a European Year 2012 for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity be built upon the experience and achievements of the European Year of Volunteering 2011, as volunteering by older persons is a genuine expression of active ageing and – insofar as

the voluntary work benefits the younger generations as well – of intergenerational solidarity.

5. TOPICS AND ACTIVITIES FOR A EUROPEAN YEAR

Given the limited resources available for a European Year, what topics and types of intervention should it focus on? How could it achieve the greatest possible mobilisation of stakeholders at all levels (EU, national, regional, local, company, sector) and thus maximise the impact of the European Year?

The Secretariat of COMECE suggests that a European Year focuses, inter alia, on the following issues:

1. The sense of family in a community – multigenerational relationships in family and society.
2. Europe's demographic challenge – pursuing family-friendly policies and ensuring the long-term viability of pension, health and care systems based on the principle of solidarity between the generations.
3. Making Europe a good place for all ages – how to assist older people in adapting to the changing realities caused by constant technological progress.
4. Older does not equal useless – fighting against the stereotypes associated with ageing and with valuing life based on the criteria of productivity, efficiency, profit and increasing consumerism. It should lead to facilitating participation of older people in social and societal life.
5. Staying active for both individual and collective benefit – encouraging voluntary activities of older people.

6. YOUR ORGANISATION'S CONTRIBUTION TO A EUROPEAN YEAR

How could your organisation contribute to the success of a European Year? What activities could it develop?

The Secretariat of COMECE maintains an open, transparent and regular dialogue with the European institutions. In the framework of this dialogue, which is enshrined in Article 17 § 3 of the new Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, several meetings between Church representatives and EU decision-makers take place every year in order to discuss European policy issues:

- An annual meeting of European religious leaders and the Presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU;
- A meeting of Church representatives and representatives of the EU Presidency in office;
- Biannual dialogue seminars co-organised by the Secretariat of COMECE, the Church and Society Commission of CEC (the Conference of European non-Catholic Churches) and the Bureau of European Policy Advisers of the European Commission.

As regards the dialogue seminars with the European Commission, which offer a fruitful exchange at expert level, Churches may propose the issues to be discussed. As the Churches and their organisations possess a longstanding record and expertise in the care for elderly people, and since many elderly people carry out volunteer work in Church parishes and charities, the Secretariat of COMECE proposes that in 2012 one of the two dialogue seminars between the Churches and the European Commission be dedicated to the issue of active ageing and intergenerational solidarity. A similar conference could be envisaged in cooperation with the European Parliament.

Moreover, once the decision is taken for a European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity, the Secretariat of COMECE would serve as a channel informing the Catholic Bishops' Conferences about this decision, thus enabling them to contribute to the success of the European Year at Member State level.

The Secretariat of COMECE would, moreover, see a European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity as a good reason for a more profound reflection on the issue, for example in its monthly review Europe Infos.

7. WHAT SUPPORT WOULD YOUR ORGANISATION REQUIRE TO PLAY A MAJOR PART IN A EUROPEAN YEAR?

Please explain what support your organisation would require from public authorities to make a significant contribution to the success of a European Year.