

Connection and Participation

Promote connected and intergenerational communities that enable participation for all older persons everywhere

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Introduction

Most of us want to live longer, to be healthy and fulfilled, and to contribute to society through paid and unpaid labour. Our ability to do this is determined by our life experience. We believe it is important to challenge the narrative of ageing societies as an economic burden. This ignores policy failures and inequalities in power and wealth. It also feeds ageism and creates potential for intergenerational conflict. Public expenditure on the needs of citizens is important from early childhood to end of life. Every generation should feel cared for and every generation should benefit.

Age & Opportunity's vision is a society where all older people are more active, visible, creative, connected and confident. Our work to promote greater participation is underpinned by our ambition to eradicate ageism in all its forms. In its Global Report on Ageism, the World Health Organisation has identified intergenerational contact as one of the three most effective interventions to reduce ageism against older people and notes that it also shows promise for reducing ageism experienced by younger people.

Ireland is a signatory to the Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing which recognises 'the need to strengthen solidarity among generations and intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs of both older and younger ones, and to encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations'. Ireland is also fully affiliated with

the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities which includes working towards more connected and intergenerational communities.

Community Connections

In 2019 TILDA reported that almost 10% of older adults are socially isolated and one third feel lonely some of the time. They found that this social isolation is associated with 'poorer self-rated health, functional limitations, poorer quality of life, and depressive symptomology.' Age & Opportunity agrees with TILDA's claim that 'loneliness and social isolation are not a necessary fact of the ageing process'. We also believe that providing opportunities for greater connection and participation benefits both individuals and society.

Commitments to develop a plan aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation, particularly among older people are made in Ireland's Roadmap for Social Inclusion, Healthy Ireland's Strategic Action Plan and our Slaintecare Strategy and Action Plan. To date there is no evidence of this commitment being met. Meanwhile NGOs and community groups continue to develop and deliver grassroots initiatives that promote connectedness, participation and social inclusion.

Research carried out by Age & Opportunity with over 700 groups in 2020 found that the importance of community groups in older people's daily and weekly routines pre Covid19, was considerable. In some circumstances, it could be said this face-to-face contact and ingrained habit of involvement and interpersonal communication was critical, particularly for those who lived alone and for many of those in rural locations where the likelihood of meeting other people daily was more limited. We believe that support for community groups and capacity building within groups and communities is a key component of keeping us connected as we age.

Intergenerational Connections

Age & Opportunity was established in 1988 on foot of a survey carried out in schools about attitudes to ageing and older people. This survey found that predominantly negative images of older people prevailed among more than half of the respondents. A large majority, moreover, held predominantly negative images of how most older people regarded the young. Back in 1986, the report concluded that ‘these negative images will not easily be dissipated without the provision of more avenues of communication between young and old.’

While family and community might support most contact between different age groups, employment and education are also key to creating intergenerational and connected communities. Public policy should allow us to continue with income generating work beyond State Pension age if that is our choice and upskilling and training opportunities must be made available for ageing and older workers. Lifelong learning should not be limited to the work-based lifespan but should recognise the learning needs and potential contribution of older learners. Some older people did not have a positive or complete experience in the Irish education system in their early lives. They should now be considered a specific target group by all service providers offering learning opportunities both locally and nationally.

Age & Opportunity sees first-hand through our programme delivery the huge contributions that older people make to their communities and to other generations. This is evidenced by TILDA research highlighting ‘the magnitude and the importance of the contribution that the middle-aged and older population make, both to their own families, through providing help and resources to both older and younger family members and through volunteering and active social participation in society.’ We believe that, to build connected and intergenerational communities, it is very important to highlight these contributions and challenge the deficit narrative of old age as a time of withdrawal, decline and dependency. It is also important to challenge stereotypical assumptions about all the members of a

generation. These assumptions undermine intergenerational solidarity and weaken the social contract between generations.

Digital Connectedness

The increasing digital world poses challenges for all generations. In October 2020, Age & Opportunity conducted a peer led research study and spoke to almost 900 older people aged over 65 in five counties to find out more about the reasons why some older people are not using computers, the internet or other digital technology. While reliable broadband continues to be an issue in some rural areas, lack of skills and motivation as well as fear are also factors. Our peer researchers also indicated that the policy of pushing essential government and financial services online is not a welcome age friendly development amongst their peers.

Digital technology also highlights intergenerational challenges and opportunities. We may inhabit very different online worlds depending on how old we are, and this can reinforce ideas and stereotypes about other age groups. However, initiatives that see younger people teaching older people to use technologies are examples of how we can challenge ageism through contact interventions and build more connected and intergenerational communities that enable greater participation by older people in all areas of life.

Age & Opportunity is working to promote connected and intergenerational communities that enable participation for all older people everywhere by:

- Challenging ageism in all its forms and opposing the deficit narrative of older age as a time of withdrawal, decline and dependency.
- Highlighting the contributions made by older people to other generations.
- Developing and delivering programmes that promote participation and greater connectedness.
- Promoting age-friendly environments that work towards more connected and intergenerational communities.
- Delivering AgeWise workshops which help prepare employers to act and prepare for a more age-diverse workplace.
- Advocating for more opportunities for lifelong learning that recognises the needs and potential contribution of older learners.
- Recommending that essential government or financial services which take a 'digital first/digital only' approach should continue to ensure that other options are available to older people to stay connected.
- Promoting greater digital literacy and inclusion among older people.
- Promoting the concept of active citizenship/civic engagement and building the capacity of older people to become more involved in and to contribute to their own communities.
- Calling for more support for the community and voluntary sector to provide opportunities for participation by people as we age.
- Creating opportunities for intergenerational contact interventions, which aim to foster interaction between people of different generations.

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Age & Opportunity's policy positions support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals