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Intergenerational Cities: A Framework for Policies and Programs

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Following a brief review of rights-based approaches to creating child- and elder-friendly cities, this paper draws from practical examples of intergenerational initiatives and programs from around the world to identify benefits and challenges of synergistic efforts to create livable cities for all ages. It suggests points of convergence, describes requirements for success, and proposes priorities for policy. Finally, it outlines a strategic framework to guide future intergenerational work by local governments, not-for-profit organizations, and other stakeholders.

KEYWORDS intergenerational, policy, planning, child-friendly, elder-friendly, shared site

Introduction

In the Tokiwadaira district, on the outskirts of Tokyo, a landlord visited his tenant only to discover a skeleton inside the apartment. The tenant had died...
three years before. None of the neighbors had noticed the man was missing. His bank kept on making rent payments until his account was empty and a rent check finally bounced, prompting the landlord’s visit and the gruesome discovery (Hideyuki, 2007). Situations of such isolation are inconceivable in socially integrated communities with mutually supportive relationships across the generations.

However, historically, the planning and development of contemporary cities have supported primarily the production and consumption of goods and services. A further goal has been efficient operation of auxiliary systems such as transportation, communication, and utility infrastructure. The primary beneficiaries are the chief producers and consumers: paid adult workers and the organizations that employ them. The needs of other groups typically take a back seat, which is especially so in market-based societies that predicate access to goods and services on one’s ability to pay a price that guarantees suppliers a profit. Largely left out are those who cannot translate their needs into a market demand. They often include elders and children.

More recently, rights-based approaches to representing the interests of both younger and older populations have gained ascendancy. For those under age 18, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the General Assembly in 1989, created a basis to address the underrepresentation of children in urban development. It spells out many rights, including the right of children “to have their voices heard in all matters affecting them.” National governments have a mandate to support implementation of CRC principles at the local level. Although most city governments have been slow to establish participatory processes with children and youth, in many countries there has been a growing interest in making cities more “child-friendly” (see, e.g., Riggio, 2002; UNICEF, 2004; Bartlett, 2005; Malone, 2006). The United States is one of only two countries not to have ratified the CRC. Although its promotion of child-friendly cities is lagging, several cities have embarked on promising initiatives (e.g., Portland, Hampton, Boulder).

Concurrently around the world there is growing support for the creation of a similar Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (CROP). These efforts draw attention to the lack of specific, international human rights legislation that protects against age discrimination, referred to as a “normative gap” in existing global conventions. Older people also remain invisible in the new Universal Periodic Review system through which the Human Rights Council monitors implementation of UN member states, which is referred to as the “implementation gap” (HelpAge International, 2010). CROP would provide an explicit, legal framework for governments to ensure the protection of older people’s rights. Meanwhile, just as more local communities are committing themselves to becoming “child- and youth-friendly,” so also are more communities adopting plans to become “elder-friendly,” embracing principles that are often very similar (see, e.g., AARP, 2005; Blue Moon,
2006; Florida Department of Elder Affairs, 2004; Henkin, Holmes, Walter, Greenberg, & Schwarz, 2005; National Association of Area Agencies on Aging/Partners for Livable Communities, 2007).

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATION

What are the benefits of intergenerational integration? Positive outcomes fall into the following interrelated categories.

Resource Expansion and Efficiency

Savings in resources will result from three factors with pragmatic and substantive aspects. First, economically and socially, elders represent underused resources. Their greater involvement in the lives of children and youth will free up this potential with little investment of public resources. Two good examples are ExperienceCorps (Carlson et al., 2004; Glass et al., 2004) and Respect Ability, both in the United States, (Carlson et al., 2004; Glass et al., 2004) and Respect Ability. Programs can also take advantage of Internet technology, enabling elders to tutor students more flexibly, not hindered by spatial mobility constraints (Middlemiss & Meyer, 2004). A randomized, controlled trial in Brazil found that structured intergenerational activities had positive effects on social capital for both adolescents and elderly people (De Souza & Grundy, 2007). Health-related intergenerational initiatives are also becoming increasingly important in Africa as communities struggle with the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS on parental care (e.g., Oduaran, 2006; Nyesigomwe, 2006). Hope Meadows, a neighborhood in Illinois (United States) in which elders receive housing benefits in return for mentorship of foster children, is another excellent example of advantages of elders as resources in intergenerational arrangements (Smith, 2001; see also Kuehne, 2005). In 2004, research in Colorado estimated the annual dollar value of volunteer work performed by adults over 60 at almost $3,000 per person (Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Aging and Adult Services, 2004, p. 165).

Second, the reverse is also true: children and youth are valuable community resources, often unrecognized. Their involvement in volunteer activity and service learning can greatly benefit elders. Examples of such efforts already exist, including GenerationLink and Intergenerational Innovations in Seattle, Washington (Kaplan, 2002). However, local governments have not systematically facilitated such efforts. Importantly, capitalizing on youth and elders as resources for each other and for communities at large shifts attention away from common misperceptions of these populations as burdens on society and instead offers the much more positive view that youth and elders represent untapped assets with valuable contributions to make (see, e.g., Seedsman, 2006).
Third, intergenerational integration of urban livability initiatives will result in more efficient use of physical facilities and funding sources. For example, schools can be used for meal services that cater to elders and can also serve as sites for the delivery of social and other programs targeting elders during after-school hours. Similarly, senior centers can be set up to include child care and after-school programs for children and youth. Such shared usage sites allow local government and school districts to respond more flexibly to demographic shifts, obviating the need for demolition and construction of specialized facilities designed narrowly to accommodate a single age group. The resulting flexibility reduces the costs of developing appropriate physical infrastructure. It also fosters intergenerational interactions that help create social capital and strengthen community.

A further benefit of integration will come from economies of scale created by streamlining staff and eliminating duplicative processes. Examples of intergenerational learning centers and similar multiuse sites include the St. Ann Center for Intergenerational care in Milwaukee, the Mount St. Vincent Intergenerational Learning Center in Seattle, the Plymouth Intergenerational Coalition Neighbors Growing Together at Virginia Tech, the Intergenerational Learning Center in Eagan (MN), and the Provena Intergenerational Center in Kankakee (IL). Cases such as these and innovative housing models like intergenerational co-housing provide a valuable foundation for more systematic policies that support integration across the lifespan (see also Whitehouse, Bendezu, FallCreek, & Whitehouse, 2000).

Policy Formulation and Implementation

Aside from more efficient use of human, physical, and financial resources, integration will facilitate the formulation and implementation of policies and programs. Rather than having to compare and weigh competing alternatives, trading off one population group against another in a zero sum game, policymakers will have a more integrated picture, showing overlaps and connections that are mutually reinforcing and supportive.4

Political Mobilization

Intergenerational integration will enable representative organizations of child, youth, and elder interests to join forces in pursuing a more unified policy agenda, such as create more walkable and safer communities. Their pooled resources and coordinated advocacy will be more effective and their media coverage will be more sustained. No longer perceived as special interest groups but seen as representative of broad spectrums of the population, the issues they champion will find more electoral support (Kennedy, 2010; HelpAge International, 2010), which will be especially the case at the local
level, where civic engagement and political awareness tend to precede and be greater than at the national level.

Sustained Community Support
A socially sustainable web of support is woven into a community when people get to know one another and begin, often in very small ways, to take responsibility for making their community a better place. All generations can work together to improve their neighborhoods in a variety of ways that create and strengthen feelings of intergenerational solidarity and community belonging (Hatton-Yeo, 2007). To specifically address this issue, the Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare developed an intergenerational program called “A Neighborhood for All Ages.” The program promotes social cohesion, which in turn leads to an atmosphere of inclusion and shared understanding.5 Making Connections, a program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, fosters this dynamic in disadvantaged neighborhoods in cities across the United States. Policies to develop a shared vision of livability in urban communities can lead to new programs that make neighborhoods safer.

At the same time, neighbors of all ages may begin to watch out for one another and join forces for such reasons as to reduce risk factors for crime and violence6 and help create the “fertile soil” in which good policy needs to be planted. Such approaches contrast with deficit-based perspectives that focus narrowly on problems, seeking instead to build on the developmental assets of children and youth and the communities in which they live (Scales et al., 2001). “Communities for all Ages” is another example of an asset-based, community-wide, multiagency effort (Henkin et al., 2005).

In a recent study of Chicago’s Southside, Yi (2011) found that hierarchical outsider organizations such as karate clubs and missionary organizations can serve as bridges that bring together population groups divided by race, social class, gender and age. The potential of such organizations to foster intergenerational relationships is similar to the creation of “third spaces” that can serve as meeting grounds for mutual learning (Eisenhart & Edwards, 2004).

CHALLENGES TO INTERGENERATIONAL INTEGRATION
Attaining the benefits just described will not be easy. Integration of the child/youth- and elder-oriented initiatives faces two types of challenges related to, respectively, characteristics of the key stakeholders and the populations they serve. Both sets of factors lead organizations to focus inward and operate in silos.
First, stakeholders typically have organizational missions and mandates that are age-specific. For example, the federally mandated Area Agencies on Aging in the United States have missions to ensure coordinated, accessible services for persons aged 60 and over to live independent, meaningful, and dignified lives. In contrast, Boys & Girls clubs are youth guidance organizations dedicated to promoting the educational, vocational, social, and character development of girls and boys ages 7 to 18. Organizations representing the interests of aging populations may offer home-help services, whereas youth-serving organizations may focus on skill development programs. A broader and more cost-effective view would allow organizations to support initiatives that combine these goals such that elders could share their experiences and expertise to benefit youth, while youth could reciprocate by, for example, performing household chores or running errands for elders with mobility constraints.

Stakeholder organizations also have separate funding streams earmarked for the age groups they serve (Henkin & Butts, 2002). Funds are often allocated to organizations for specific activities and specific target populations. Even if they are inclined toward collaborating across age groups, organizations may be restricted from doing so by their financial statutes and contractual obligations.

Furthermore, children and youth as well as elders may be in situations of disadvantage. Particularly, those of low incomes and minority backgrounds are often in the social and economic margins. One practical implication is that they are restricted in their mobility, making the logistics of social interactions and participation more difficult (Dickerson et al., 2007; Sanderson & Richards, 2010). For youth, school schedules present additional constraints. More recently, fuel prices have raised transportation costs with the effect of curtailing services and activities for impacted youth and elder populations (e.g., Leland, 2008).

In addition, mutual misperceptions are not uncommon. Research has found evidence of stereotypical images of elders in widely different cultures from Nigeria to the United States to China (Boduroglu, Yoon, Luo, & Park, 2006; Okoye, 2005; Okoye & Obikeze, 2005). Even when the portrayal of elders is not caricaturesque, it can be counterproductive to depict them as dependent and needy. The glorification of independence as a desirable quality reflects cultural values of individualism that are not universally shared but widely perpetuated.

On the other hand, misperceptions of youth also exist:

I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words. When I was a boy, we were taught to be discrete and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and impatient of restraint.
Attributed variously to Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Hesiod, “an old monk,” an Assyrian cuneiform tablet, and an ancient Egyptian papyrus, regardless of its authenticity, this quote well illustrates denigrating views of youth found among adults. According to research in the United States and abroad, media frequently portray young people as alcoholics and drug abusers, criminals, bludgers, lazy, complaining, and aggressive.

Elimination of ageism across the lifespan is necessary so that those who engage in development of their communities do so on equal footing and based on mutual respect (Pain, 2005; HelpAge International, 2010). Of interest in this regard are findings from a recent study that found that more frequent contact, greater grandparent involvement, and better parent–grandparent relationships predicted adolescents’ reports of higher levels of emotional closeness to, importance of, and respect for their closest grandparent’s views (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, & Buchanan, 2009).

Another potential issue is that children/youth and elders typically have different levels of skill, knowledge, and experience that can hinder joint activities. Young people often need training and practice to learn how to be effective when talking in public, conducting meetings, collecting and analyzing data, resolving conflicts, and preparing and presenting recommendations. These are activities with which elders may have experience that can benefit young people. On the other hand, young people may be more proficient in using computers and social media in ways that can enrich the lives of elders. These different levels of preparation must be considered by local authorities planning to start intergenerational initiatives.

Finally, children, youth, and elders are populations for which frequent life transitions undermine the sustainability of relationships and processes. Youth may move away for school or jobs, and when they become young adults they do not always transfer their experiences to the next cohort. Elders may become too frail to be able to continue their engagement. Other threats to sustainable practices are organizational in nature, having to do with staff turnover and training, administrative buy-in by political appointees, etc.

AREAS OF CONVERGENCE

The same issues affecting children and youth often also affect elders, particularly those with low incomes and limited support systems. All benefit from neighborhoods that are safe and walkable and have housing that is affordable and near shops, neighbors, and services, with easy access to public spaces for social interactions. Likewise, all benefit from the availability of healthy foods at local markets, traditional Mexican mercados, and community gardens within neighborhoods (e.g., Bryant, 2008; Goltsman, Kelly, Mckay, Alagara, & Wright, 2009; Van den Berg, van Winsum-Westra, de Vries, van Dillen, 2010). Schools that serve as community centers and
senior centers that offer child care and after-school programs can simultaneously provide for the physical and social needs of both elders and children and youth. Similarly, both populations also need reliable, safe, and affordable public transportation to support independent mobility and access to the resources of the city.

The long-term outcomes contributing to a livable city for children and youth are the same long-term outcomes that will create livable cities for elders. A livable city for all ages requires a supportive:

- physical environment, including land use mix and accessibility, transportation network, housing options, and community facilities;
- social and economic environment, including affordability of housing and services, the local network of individuals, institutions and community organizations, and opportunities for employment;
- services system, including the availability of retail and commercial services, home and day care providers, community and public agencies, and medical service providers; and
- system of governance and civic engagement, including participation in political processes, empowerment, and opportunities for community involvement.

Working collaboratively within this broad framework while drawing on existing strengths in local communities, synergy will be significant in the following priority areas for policy:

- Appropriate regulations: In many countries, zoning codes mandated by local plans typically support low-density, automobile-dependent urban growth patterns that have restricted transportation options and narrowed housing choices to a limited spectrum (Kennedy, 2010). Local governments must remove regulatory barriers that hinder community livability and multi-use sites while establishing regulations for good community design and housing for healthy living, transportation, and social interactions. These recommended changes are based on experiences with universal design (e.g., Dumbaugh, 2008) and shared facilities serving multiple community functions. Other government interventions relate to tax relief for grandparent caregivers and incentives for housing schemes supporting intergenerational relationships (e.g., Beltran & Smith, 2003; Thang & Mehta, 2006; see Kennedy, 2010, for examples of innovative housing options).
- Safe and accessible environments: Local authorities need to create safe, pedestrian-friendly streets with crosswalks, traffic-calming designs and sidewalks, parks, and other public spaces. Examples of the benefits of such interventions come from the planning and neighborhood planning and
design principles behind the Dutch “woonerf” (Karsten & van Vliet, 2006), the British home zone (Gill, 2006), and cyclovia experiences, which spread from Colombia to Peru, France, Italy, the United States, and elsewhere.8

- Governance and civic engagement: Local governments must include youth and elders in decision-making processes to increase social capital among generations. This work can build on ongoing efforts to promote participation in local government and community processes. Civic engagement and empowerment of children and youth is becoming more accepted, and appropriate methods have been developed (e.g., Commonwealth Youth Programme, 2007; Driskell, 2002; Gallagher, 2004; UN Habitat, 2004; UNFPA, 2007; Woolcombe, 2006, 2007).

- The empowerment of elders and acknowledgement of their agency in urban development is gaining currency (e.g., Gensicke, 2010) but still contending with oft prevailing, mistaken notions of predominant dependence (see, e.g., Boermel, 2006; Vera-Sanso, 2006). Of special interest in the context of cities for all ages are participatory intergenerational community building initiatives (see Kaplan, Higdon, Crago, & Robbins, 2004, and Lawrence-Jacobsen, 2006, for examples).

- Innovative food assistance/nutrition programs: Governments must encourage local food production, support small scale and local agriculture, and expand use of existing meal sites to multiple generations. This work can build on existing programs and practices around community gardens, nutrition, active living, and obesity reduction (e.g., Doyle, 2002; Liddicoat et al., 2007; Lautenschlager & Smith, 2007; Bryant, 2008). Related efforts focus on environmental education and the preservation of natural resources in urban areas (Mayer-Smith & Peterat, 2006).

- Culture change: Local governments must engage in social marketing, so residents and decision makers will think of cities foremost in terms of their livability for all people, irrespective of age and ability, enacting choices guided by commensurate values. This work can build on the UN Principles for Older Persons of 1991 and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging of 2002 and is consistent with growing international endorsement of the mission of InterGeneration Day.9 These developments converge with efforts to establish a UN Convention on the Rights of Older People (HelpAge International, 2010).

MODELING INTERGENERATIONAL INTEGRATION

The process toward achieving cities for all ages can be framed by a logic model that makes it possible to work backward from its overall goal of creating a livable city for all age groups to the increasing specificity of long-term, midterm, and short-term outcomes and more immediate “SMART” objectives the attainment of which links current actions to resource requirements.10
By systematically integrating child/youth- and elder-oriented objectives and outcomes, it is possible to elaborate and refine such a logic model in order to guide convergence of local policies and programmatic activities in areas of overlap. Figure 1 focuses on steps leading toward supportive physical, social, and economic environments in efforts toward creating livable cities for all ages, while Figure 2 outlines actions and outcomes that will lead to supportive services systems and supportive government and civic engagement processes that are characteristic of such cities.

For example, research has shown that access to nature (a midterm outcome) is part of a supportive physical environment (a long-term outcome) toward the overall goal of a livable city for all ages. Several short-term outcomes can contribute to access to nature, such as greening vacant lots. A SMART objective that can, in turn, help enable the greening of vacant lots would be the mapping of all vacant lots within city boundaries by a specified date. Undertaking the mapping would then require specific resources (e.g., people with certain skills, maps).

The sequenced outcomes in Figures 1 and 2 serve as examples only and do not show the many overlaps and connections that exist between outcomes and actions. This kind of model is not intended as a rigid plan but as a guide to action with continuous feedback loops to enable monitoring and evaluation of ongoing processes and intermediate outcomes, informing adjustments of interventions that are not effective or produce unintended results. Indeed, research must be a critical component of intergenerational policies and practices. The Intergenerational Solidarity Model (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) and the Depth of Intergenerational Engagement Scale (Kaplan, 2002) are useful starting points for the development of locally appropriate research tools.

As well, it is important not to lose sight of each population group’s unique requirements. Policies must take advantage of areas of overlap, but they must also acknowledge distinct needs of each population group. Finally, the kind of model proposed here is meant as a guide for intergenerational initiatives by not just the public sector and not-for-profit organizations but can also serve as a framework for private sector organizations and, more generally, for coordinated work by broad-based partnerships by a variety of stakeholders (Van Vliet, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Urban development plans offer useful scaffolding for tying community voices of youth, elders, and others to issues in the five policy priority areas identified earlier: appropriate regulations, safe and accessible environments, governance and civic engagement, innovative food assistance and nutrition programs, and culture change. Such plans have policy implications
FIGURE 1 Logic Model for a Livable City for All Ages (Part 1) (color figure available online).
FIGURE 2 Logic Model for a Livable City for All Ages (Part 2) (color figure available online).
for four environments that are key to a livable city for all ages: the physical environment, the social and economic environment, the services system, and the system of governance and civic engagement. Relevant as well is the participation of intergovernmental organizations and their working relationship with local authorities.

As a first step toward making cities more livable for people of all ages, a planning process can bring together key partners and relevant stakeholders to determine needed policies, which may include revising building codes and zoning ordinances, incentivizing multi-site use, and creating cross-sector policy mechanisms. From this process, a proposal may emerge for a pilot in a few local areas, selected because of their high numbers of youth and elders and their potential for mobilizing resources (e.g., local presence of possible partner organizations and prospects for creating support networks). Organizationally, advisory committees may include youth and elders from the participating partners. Moving forward with planning for such an integrated effort will require resources. A key element will be a facilitator to coordinate work, with adequate staff and operations support.

An expert group meeting on strengthening economic and social ties through intergenerational solidarity emphasized building on existing social networks, noting that it does not require major public sector interventions (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007). Nonetheless, governments remain crucial partners in more broad-based arrangements that include the community, family, and private sector, particularly in cultures where values of filial care have been changing, as is the case in many African and East Asian countries, prompting a reinterpretation of resource flows within families and a reconsideration of the role of government in modernization processes (see Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2007; Aboderin, 2006). Recent research in Europe further shows the modulating roles of government institutions in shaping intergenerational relationships (Blome, Keck, & Alber, 2009). Local government is especially important in regard to aspects of urban planning and community development, which cannot be left to either private market forces or a complementary economy created by volunteers.

Present circumstances position cities uniquely to become national models for intergenerational approaches that help build strong supportive networks in communities with large populations of children, youth, and elders in greatest need.

Urban policymakers across many countries are facing similar challenges related to perceptions that aging populations (the so called “silver tsunami”) inevitably set up resource competition across age groups in an era of fiscal constraints. Concerns about anticipated cuts or capped growth in health and social service programs and benefits often magnify the need for cost-effective solutions.
However, a review of the literature and observations on the ground enable us to develop a keen appreciation for the complexity and interlocking nature of community issues and the importance of responding to these issues in the connected ways in which residents experience them. Rather than a “silver tsunami,” there is a “golden wave of opportunity.” Urban livability policies are not necessarily a zero-sum game. Examples presented in this article show that programs and actions that benefit one population group are not inevitably at the cost of another population group. Synergistic approaches, where the sum of collaborative work is greater than the total of disparate efforts, will produce more cost-effective solutions and create more age-integrated communities. We must open up opportunities for thinking differently and acting differently to ensure the long-term well-being of the world’s urban residents. Organizationally and politically, cities are well poised to develop the kinds of innovative policies that are needed to address the pressing challenges of changing demographics confronting governments around the world.

NOTES


2. The other country is Somalia, which does not have an officially recognized government to ratify the convention.

3. Developed by EarthLink in 2002, GenerationLink uses the Internet to forge a connection between teens and seniors and create an intergenerational dialogue. High schools with 10 computers and 10 willing students can participate. EarthLink’s GenerationLink has launched in Atlanta, Orlando, Dallas, and Philadelphia and is expanding to more cities nationwide.

4. Cost savings may induce policymakers to make decisions that only superficially create intergenerational situations (e.g., co-location of a school and senior services) because other factors (such as establishing intergenerational programs, training staff, and embracing families) remain absent. In other words, physical change, in itself, will usually be insufficient.

5. For more information about this program and about a related initiative involving a “neighborhood reminiscence” approach, see Christina Mercken’s article http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu/DOCS/V2NO2.PDF and the work of Penninx, K. (1996). The neighborhood of all ages: Intergenerational neighborhood development in the context of local social policy. Utrecht, Netherlands: Dutch Institute for Care and Welfare.

6. See the publication Towards More Confident Communities from the Centre for Intergenerational Practice and the Beth Johnson Foundation for more information about intergenerational approaches to community reassurance see http://www.centreforip.org.uk/res/documents/publication/Towards%20more%20Confident%20Communities.pdf)


10. SMART objectives are objectives that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-framed.
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