

Intergenerational Reciprocity in Asia¹

Innovation and continuity

Intergenerational reciprocity is at the core of the reproduction of Asian societies. The mutual exchange of support between different generations, in particular within families and communities, plays a significant role in shaping the social fabric and relationships in the region.

Intergenerational reciprocity is not an exchange between equal market values. It has a material expression (goods, resources) and a non-material one (care and love), stemming from a mutual sense of obligation and identity.

Rapid and profound changes in the structure of populations are, however, challenging these social practices, and new forms of intergenerational collaboration are emerging, although that does not mean the demise of the traditional sources of reciprocity.

Decline of intergenerational households?

The highest source of intergenerational reciprocity is the family, commonly facilitated by the multigenerational household. Although a large proportion of households are still multigenerational, especially in Middle- and Low-Income countries in Asia, factors such as urbanisation, migration, demography/fertility, technological advances and even government policies have contributed to diminish their presence.

Co-residence can be an efficient way for family members to help each other as joint residence allows to combine household resources and share time and mutual support. A vast majority (around 75%) of older people in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Vietnam, still live in multigenerational households, with at least one adult child or grandchild². According to the LASI report of 2020, 83.6% of older people in India live in multigenerational households³, while Thailand has a lower proportion than other MICs. (55%).

An opposite situation is presented in Japan, with 24%, or South Korea, with only 25% of older people living in multigenerational households⁴.

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² Teerawichitchainan, Bussarawan, Wiraporn Pothisiri, and Thanh Long Giang, "How Do Living Arrangements and Intergenerational Support Matter for Psychological Health of Elderly Parents? Evidence From Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand," *Social Science & Medicine*, 2015

³ *Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), 2020*

⁴ *Asia Aging: Demographic, Economic, and Health Transitions, International Population Reports, US Census Bureau, 2022*

But defining the household as a sole measure of intergenerational family support seems to be insufficient. The reduction in the proportion of multigenerational households, happening in more advanced economies in particular, does not necessarily imply weakened bonds between generations.

Living apart but in proximity in the same city/county appears to be an arrangement that maintains intergenerational connections in China, replacing the multigenerational household as the most prevalent living arrangement. *“We show that the shift to proximity is a result of the negotiations between traditional and modernizing tendencies, and is further enabled by significantly improved housing and household financial conditions”*⁵.

Economically imposed migration leads in many cases to intergenerational support through remittances, which is the shape that takes reciprocity when physical distance separates families.

Understanding the generational economy has advanced significantly with the National Transfers Accounts methodology, but there are still large gaps in knowledge. Understanding of the implications of population ageing on current economic relations between generations is crucial to design societies where well-being of all generations is at the front.

Intergenerational reciprocity is also challenged in climate change. Action or inaction on mitigation and adaptation is already presenting a perspective of confrontation between young and old today, between the mature and old today and the old of the future. Strong intergenerational action is needed now, from community to national and global levels. The legacy of an unsustainable world jeopardises any long-term intergenerational solidarity.

Some community level intergenerational innovations in Asia

Thailand

The Foundation For Older Persons' Development(FOPDEV) is using an age-inclusive approach, encouraging existing community-based organisations to become more sensitive and inclusive of different generations.

FOPDEV faces three different situations in terms of generational composition of community-based organisations:

⁵ *Fan Zhang and Yuxiao Wu, Living with grandparents: Multi-generational families and the academic performance of grandchildren in China*

1. Older people's organisations (OPA) - formed as organisations of older people – members/leaders are older people, without younger people. A more intergenerational perspective includes “near olds” in their membership.
2. Intergenerational organisations - bring the old and young together from the beginning of their formation, work hand in hand to address members' and community challenges.
3. Organisations focusing on climate change adaptation and disaster preparedness - these are generally led by younger people with limited participation of older persons.

Testing a multigenerational approach in the last group of organisations, FOPDEV applied the design-thinking methodology to sensitise younger and older members of the community, providing some small grants to test the solution coming out of the design thinking process. Engaging older and younger people in the design of a project and its implementation has brought noticeable positive results:

- Shift in younger people's perception on the capacity and role of older persons in their community.
- Awareness that older people's local knowledge and life experience can contribute to successes in DRR and CCA.
- Better protection and support for the vulnerable, young and old, during different stages of disaster management.
- Improvement in the mental health and well-being of older people.
- Strengthening of community bonding.

Sri Lanka

HelpAge Sri Lanka (HASL) started a tree planting programme aimed at intergenerational collaboration and engaging in climate change action.

HASL initiated the programme building awareness of climate challenges, environmental issues and intergenerational collaboration with a) school children and b) Senior Citizen Committees (SCCs). This was followed by identifying - jointly with SCC leaders - possible SCCs and schools to implement tree planting programmes. Five SCCs were trained in preparing plant nurseries. They produced 5,000 tree seedlings of Jackfruit trees, mahogany trees, mango trees, etc. These seedlings were distributed to targeted SCCs and schools to do tree planting. More than 750 elders and 500 school students from Gampaha and Kalutara Districts took part in the programme.

This programme was deemed successful in creating momentum for intergenerational collaboration around climate action. This programme aims at being replicated elsewhere in Sri Lanka, becoming a national initiative.

Philippines

“Compassionate” ageism during COVID led many Barangais to forbid older people to leave their homes. This was based on the false understanding of protecting older people as they were seen as vulnerable to COVID.

In this context, the Coalition of Services of the Elderly (COSE) led a campaign enlisting younger people from De La Salle University (DLSU) to develop a campaign aimed at addressing attitudes that stigmatise older people as ‘incapable’ and a ‘burden’ to their families. The messaging was intended to challenge these negative ideas and empower older people to showcase their abilities to a wide range of audiences such as university students, government employees, and those working closely with older people.

The engagement of young DLSU students with their broad access and use of social media expanded the campaign reach⁶.

India

HelpAge India has multiple intergenerational initiatives, and considerable presence in schools throughout the country. Some of the most relevant projects are:

School Advocacy and Value Education Programme, wherein school children are sensitised to reach out to the elders in their families and around their neighborhood, going forward into volunteering and spending time in Homes of the Aged on festive occasions (festivals, birthdays etc.) in addition to raising funds for these activities. A rather new activity is the involvement of school children in digital empowerment of the elderly under the “Digital Gurucool” programme.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HITJZ8SIF34>

Rural Elders Self Help Groups (ESHGs) have by default got an intergenerational approach. There are youth volunteers who assist the elderly not only in managing the books of accounts, but have also been recently trained as Village Level Community Care workers working alongside the Elders Self Help Groups in Community Managed Palliative Care.

⁶ *Bringing generations together for change. Case study: The Philippines, HelpAge, 2020*

One significant area of intergenerational collaboration has been in the elder's savings and credit scheme. A portion of the Savings and Credit trickles from/to the youth within the family of the member elders. *"We have noticed that the younger people contribute to the savings and in turn when they require credit, the grandparents/parents, avail the internal loan from the groups, most significantly for marriage/education of grandchildren (granddaughters) and then as stopgap arrangement for crop loans of their children".*⁷

Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS)⁸ is a civil society organization in India's Thar Desert which has been organising **Intergenerational Learning Groups (ILGs)** to bring girls, women, and older women together to share their knowledge, understand the climate emergency, preserve scarce water resources and ensure their intergenerational voice is heard.

The most important feature of their functioning is that it provides a platform for conversation between older and younger generations to resolve issues of common concern. In regions where most of the older generation is either illiterate or less educated, ILGs promise an enormous potential in bridging knowledge and skill gaps. *"Beyond the transfer of knowledge, it cultivates reciprocal learning relationships between different generations, helps to develop social capital and relieve isolation while involving people in community activities, contributing to improved general health and overall wellbeing."*⁹

Republic of Korea

HelpAge Korea engages with Older People's Self-Help Groups, supporting various activities. Among these activities are the intergenerational solidarity programmes. These are based on the idea of older persons supporting the activities of the young.

When older people proposed intergenerational solidarity activities at the youth center, the initial reaction was very negative. *"It's a burden when we do events with older people because they are stubborn and they don't want to do anything,"* said a youth center staff member.

This negative perception was rapidly dispelled when implementing different activities, like the following:

Older people participating as volunteers in a summer camp for children at a youth center. Their role was to cook and provide cups of rice to the children. In return, children made bread and scarves and gave them to older people as gifts.

Older people participated as volunteers in a programme run by the library where three

⁷ Rajeshwar, HelpAge India, testimony

⁸ Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti HelpAge Network Member. See: <https://www.gravis.org.in/index.php/what-is-gravis>.

⁹ Ibid

generations come together. Participants include parents, children and older people. The role of older people was to teach children how to knit and draw calligraphy.

Another project was having older people hold bazaars to raise ^{money}, which is donated to youth from low-income families. Additionally, they invited the young people to have a meal with them and also gave them donations in kind.

Gradually perceptions changed, as the interaction between generations became clearly constructive. *“I thought older people were a burden, but I think they are good partners with whom we can collaborate on intergenerational solidarity activities”* said a youth worker.

Learnings

1. Intergenerational activities also mean that older people can support the young in many ways.
2. Cultural and value transmission to younger generations is facilitated by joint activities of young and old.
3. Ageism is better dispelled, connecting generations in practice

Vietnam

The Intergenerational Self-Help Clubs (ISHCs) are the result of several years of evolving practice and improvement of Older People’s Organisations (OPAs). These are multifunctional, participative community-based organisations that have a large component of older people but also a proportion of the younger generation, those approaching formal old age but still not in that category (50-60 year olds). The ISHCs have become national policy and are in the process of expanding nationwide. This approach has inspired similar intergenerational approaches in Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia and Bangladesh.

General conclusions

- Intergenerational reciprocity in Asia is a profound cultural and societal concept that has shaped the region’s family dynamics and relationships for centuries. While changing demographics, migration, urbanisation present challenges, the essence of this practice remains relevant.
- By embracing innovation, adapting policies, and preserving cultural values, Asian societies can continue to uphold the principles of intergenerational reciprocity in an evolving world. This ensures that the wisdom, care, and support of one generation continue to enrich the lives of current and future young and old.
- Expanding knowledge leading to policy developments requires continuous research and analysis of intergenerational adaptations.

- Intergenerational approaches are not limited to old and children but involve all age segments. In some cases, the generations in between (i.e. 30-60 years old) are key components of intergenerational cooperation.
- Climate change action, whether in adaptation or mitigation, presents an opportunity for intergenerational action.
- IT literacy is a proven way of intergenerational collaboration, with the young contributing to uplifting the IT skills of older generations.
- Ageism and negative perceptions based on age can better be dispelled in practical actions and activities involving different generations.

Eduardo Klien
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Annex 1. – Areas for potential intergenerational policy development

Although intergenerational solidarity and reciprocity is now commonly mentioned in the development discourse, there is still weak formal policy substance behind. Several action areas, however, present promising spaces for adoption of clear policies and integration of the approaches in broader national plans.

Specific policies, however, can be focused in a few promising areas of intergenerational collaboration, as the experiences below show:

- **Technology** – Different initiatives have sprung in Asia connecting younger and older people in programmes to equip older people in the use of information technology. Singapore has an extensive programme where younger students, mainly upper secondary school and initial university years, work with older people to teach and practice with them accessing to internet for shopping, making medical appointments and obtaining information. These skills also teach older people to connect through social media. Similarly, in India, HelpAge India carries out a programme with schools training older people in the use of smart phones and IT to access information. In many cases the experience has led to teach older people who are illiterate to become versed using smart phones.
- **Homecare** – This is another area where younger generations contribute to the wellbeing of older people in need of support, who are disabled or bed-ridden at home. These programmes are common and were based on volunteers providing care. An intergenerational initiative on volunteer Homecare was led by HelpAge Korea and HelpAge International in 9 ASEAN countries and this intergenerational

way of engaging young and old became an officially blessed approach by ASEAN Secretariat.

- **Climate and environmental protection** – The growing concern on climate change and the impact of extreme weather events is clearly felt in Asia and the Pacific. Although there is no evidence of a Western-type generational divide in blaming responsibilities for climate change, there is enormous potential for expanded collaboration. The Philippines has had experience in intergenerational Disaster Risk Reduction projects, so does Thailand -where co-design between generations has led to intergenerational community-based organisations focusing on disaster prevention and management- and Vietnam. HelpAge is conducting a pilot project in Nepal holding intergenerational dialogue to generate common agendas on climate action. HelpAge Sri Lanka is seeking to scale up a tree planting and environmental programme engaging the school system and the Senior Citizen's Clubs.
- **Housing** – Singapore has excelled in designing housing projects and neighbourhoods that combine ethnic groups and different generations. In the design the family proximity is considered as relevant. Communal spaces host multiple activities for older people, for younger people and for older and younger together.
- **Workplaces** – It was not uncommon to consider in formal work-settings, that the continuation of work of older people was a hindrance for employment of younger generations. This assumed that there was a limited number of jobs and if older people were taking them, and opportunities for the young would be reduced. Multiple studies have demonstrated this to be a fallacy. In some cases, evidence on the contrary has been found, especially in multigenerational workplaces where the *Crystallised abilities* of mature workers combines well with the *fluid abilities* that characterise the younger ones. Outlawing discrimination on the basis of age has not only an economic rationale but also an intergenerational purpose. Likewise, Japan has been promoting in the last years the employment of older persons in multigenerational workplaces.
- **Families** – The traditional generational reciprocity between parents and children has in some cases weakened, leading to some countries (i.e. China) to decree -this was an official policy- that children had the responsibility to support and visit parents regularly. However, filial piety and love in Asian families are still the strongest bond, stronger than any official policy which only serve to prevent and repair damaged relations. In most countries of Asia/Pacific care of grandchildren is a classic mode of support involving three generations
- **Communities** – This is the space where people's lives happens, where social relations are woven, where people of different ages live, from childhood to old age. Community organisations that are relevant combine the interests of the community as a whole with that of specific age groups. It is at community levels where the

intergenerational bonds can be expanded beyond the immediate family. The ISHCs in Asia -in particular in Vietnam- have become a national policy with a clear intergenerational mandate that includes the old and the near old (those approaching old age)

- **Social behaviours** – Ageism is frequently nested in younger generations. Although the concept of ageism as a discriminatory practice has gained traction in the last years, only few national policies tend to address the issue. Thailand conducted studies to feed into the Second National Long-term Plan for Older Persons (2002–2021). The National Commission for Older Persons of Indonesia implemented intergenerational workshops for young and old activists with a view to changing images of ageing and tackling ageism. In the I. R. Iran Islamic Republic of Iran, an educational intervention with an intergenerational element was conducted among school and University students focusing on issues relevant too ageing and the life course. This intervention included dialogues with older people¹⁰.

A final note is that further research and understanding of intergenerationality is needed. The National Transfers Account (NTA) has emerged as a powerful tool for understanding the generational flows, that are very context specific, and which can inform appropriate policies, especially on social protection through the life course. The MIPAA reviews and surveys led by ESCAP have also highlighted the intergenerational aspiration.

There are currently several surveys in the region that investigate aspects of intergenerational support: Cambodia Elderly Survey, CHARLS, CHLHS, Anhui Study, IFSL, Myanmar Ageing Survey, Philippines Longitudinal Study of Ageing, HART, Vietnam Ageing Survey, amongst others. An important step would be to harmonise these in order to achieve further insights and provide some comparability of advances in this area¹¹

¹⁰ UNESCAP, *Key elements of ageing policy*, Camilla Williamson (consultant), 2021

¹¹ Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan and John Knodel, 2015. *Data Mapping on Ageing in Asia and the Pacific: Analytical Report*. HelpAge International and UNFPA. P. 31.