

Expert Group Meeting in preparation for the 30th anniversary of the International Year of Family, 2024

Population Ageing and Family well-being in Europe

SESSION 4: Families, ageing and education (SDG 4), Irma Rognoni Viader

In current times there has been a demographic change in Europe which requires a MANAGEMENT to adapt cities to aging and the growth of the group of elderly people (as mentioned in previous expositions: lengthening of life expectancy, medical advances, large decrease in births ...). On the other hand, there are migratory movements of people from countries which are suffering armed conflicts or suffering structural violence, countries without rule of law or non-respectful for human rights, or as a result of climate change and lack of minimum conditions for survival.

In general, large European cities are the recipients of this migrant population, reaching the extreme limits of the possibility of integration of this population.

At the same time, elderly should live in "friendly" cities that promote active aging and address vulnerabilities throughout the life cycle, the autonomy of the elderly should be promoted as much as possible also the recognition of their contributions to society, that is the called SOCIAL CAPITAL they bring.

With regard to the elderly and their development, a special consideration should be given to the integration of migrant elderly people, measures for access to knowledge, education and training, as well as intergenerational solidarity and the fight against poverty.

In all these senses, the contribution of entities and NGOs become fundamental. In Barcelona and Catalonia, there are innumerable entities, most of them, with a large number of volunteers and all of them have a great social weight in order to achieve the integration of migrants, therefore both -the Spanish State and the Autonomous Community of Catalonia- they offer subsidies to the NGOs so they can offer an individualized, personalized service and adapted to the needs of each person, all in coordination with the social services of the territory.

Cities should strengthen the promotion of elderly people, migrants or locals, intergenerational relations, active aging and lifelong education. Given the importance of demographic change, age diversity must be managed.

In the Foundation that I manage, we have a large number of elderly students, 399 per year, apart from the regular classes, we have created what we call "Conversation Groups" between young students in secondary school and adult migrants, so we have met the demands of older people, to learn the practice of the language and increase the fluency of the language and to go faster in their own process of integration in the host country, and at the same time the solidarity of young people, the relationship between generations and cultural exchange between the both generations (young-elder exchange), working both diversity and equality.

Barcelona has experienced a process of population aging, like most European cities, since 1980. The number of people over 65 years of age, increased from 332,000 in 2000 to 350,000 in 2020 that represents 21% of the population in Barcelona. The number of people living alone has increased from 155,000 in 2000 to 204,000 in 2020 that means a 12% of the population lives alone, the majority of whom are elderly, with a loneliness rate of 32%. Life expectancy in Barcelona has increased from 79 years in 2000 to 87 years in women and 81 years in men in 2020. The number of migrants over 65 years of age in 2021 is 2,800 people. On the other hand, the number of people over 65 years of age without studies is 97% of the total population without studies, and 54% of the total population with primary studies. All this implies the need for cities to take into account the elderly population in their future policies, especially with regard to the need to promote lifelong education in order to avoid vulnerability, poverty and social exclusion.

The WHO considers that the participation of the elderly in society at different levels is of utmost importance and enriches society, and that continuous and lifelong training is essential in order not to remain isolated in society, given the rapid technological advances. In the Foundation where I work, the elderly and migrants arrive at our reception services with high learning deficit, many of them are analphabet in their own country of origin, so we must make literacy courses, before proceeding to formal training courses in languages. In other cases, they have knowledge of their own language, but since they have another alphabet, we must also initiate them to our alphabet (letters and numbers). This means that the integration process will be slow because the first step for migrated people is the language.

We must build a new model of society with new forms of organization and social relations. The common denominator of this model is the centrality of new information and communication technologies in all areas of social life. We live in the *knowledge society* and therefore the training of people must be lifelong, otherwise the effects would be isolation and lack of participation of the individual in society, and this especially affects the elderly. It is necessary to promote the digital literacy of the elderly through computer courses or workshops, to learn how to use the Internet and the use of different devices common in everyday life, to stimulate the use of ICT, for example through exercises that stimulate memory virtually and, unlike young people, to promote the use of social networks.

The NGOs are trying to give the elder and migrant population access to Adult Education Centers as a continuation of the initial reception, especially linguistic and personal, of older migrants. This new broader and more extensive look at education requires a conceptual definition, the concept of *lifelong education* includes educational processes that involve people in their different moments of the life cycle, therefore adult education is part of this lifelong education (*Institut d'Estudis Regionals i Metropolitans de Barcelona - IERMB, Desembre 2017 Títol: L'educació al llarg de la vida a Barcelona: educació post-obligatòria i pràctiques educatives comunitàries*).

The paradigm of active aging, formulated by the WHO and presented at the Second World Assembly on Aging held in 2002, postulates that aging is a positive experience resulting from the lengthening of life in Europe especially, and that it is accompanied by continuous opportunities for participation, security and training, therefore it is a process for improving the living conditions of older people. Active aging is based on the recognition of the human rights of the elderly and the basic principles promulgated by the United Nations: independence, participation, dignity, care and fulfillment of one's wishes. For this, it is necessary to involve all services, institutions and entities in a cross-cutting manner, and at the same time, it must be an intergenerational commitment, since it affects all generations.

I remember that in our Foundation we welcome a person to do Community Service (as an Alternative Measure to Prison, imposed by the Judge) to an elderly person, migrant, and with slight disability. The Government Services of the Autonomous Community asked me if we could host him in, since no one wanted to take him in because he was elder, Moroccan migrant and disabled. Of course, I said yes. The surprise was that he became one of the most loved people by all the staff and, more important, by the migrant youth between 16 and 18 years old who attend our center for literacy, because he spoke their language, he disciplined them, they obeyed him immediately, he became a real reference for the children, as the "father-grandfather" that they do not have in the host country ; he felt so happy and told us that after this experience he understood better the motivation for life. We hope he will continue as a volunteer.

I would like to mention some cases that we have been able to share with our beneficiaries: it has happened that people who have received literacy courses have subsequently helped as volunteers to other newcomers, this is more efficient, integrating and enriching volunteer work and somehow, they have the illusion of "giving back to the host country" what the host country has done for them. In other cases, they have asked us for access to material to complement the classes they receive in order to go "faster in the learning process".

However, in many cases it is necessary to work and teach "functional digital literacy" sessions. Many people know how to use the cell phone to make calls but they are not able to use it for the "hundreds" of procedures they must carry out to acquire their legal residence: request previous appointments, fill out online applications, request administrative or registry documents online, they must add documents online ,sometimes the applications state files require documents only possible by PDF) so they must scan documents, upload and download them depending on the moment, and they can't pay a professional to do it because they live on social benefits and barely survive. ... if they do not count on a reinforcement of the NGOs it is impossible and their desperation - after the migratory path, if they have survived - to reach Europe is immense.

The "functional digital literacy" of the elderly, both native and migrants, is one of our priorities at the Foundation, since the digital divide, an essential element in the fight against poverty and social exclusion of the elderly, must be overcome. This avoids situations of isolation and even unwanted loneliness. During the Covid pandemic, one of our projects was entirely dedicated to this aspect in order to fight against loneliness and isolation, in this case mostly local elderly people.

In the Foundation we have witnessed anguish or anxiety or panic attacks, so that, even on more than one occasion, we have had to call the ambulance to help us, a fact that I take advantage of, as a lawyer, and the knowledge of public services, so we ask the public medical emergency service to issue a report to manage more quickly some of the procedures. I remember one case about an elder couple who have suffered threats in Afghanistan with the Taliban regime or another family who have had to cross borders with children and grandchildren at night through areas with vegetation and hearing gunshots before crossing without knowing if they would survive, elderly people whose children receive death threats in Colombia or Venezuela and they all have had to emigrate - the whole family- etc...: in short, extreme situations from all over the world.

In the Foundation we welcome people from all countries (last year we attended 399 individuals), mostly from Asia, Africa and Central and South America, last year we had a large attendance of

people from Ukraine (many times with great education from the country of origin, whose demand was to learn very quickly the Spanish language).

The language teachers of the courses that we offer are themselves elderly local people (sometimes even migrants) who carry out these tasks on a completely voluntary basis, with a firm and tenacious commitment on a weekly basis and throughout the course. The teachers are deeply motivated, they understand the hardness of life and therefore can easily empathize with the users, they perform their task with a deep affection which establishes a bond of support even emotional, mutually recognizing the efforts that everyone makes in one way or another. Some volunteers have children and grandchildren far from Barcelona and therefore their work helps them to overcome "unwanted loneliness". In fact, therefore, they are situations of "*mutual help*". We cannot forget that elderly people without family support nearby are more vulnerable than those who have family support nearby, either because of physical distance or because of difficulties in reconciling work and family life.

It is for all these reasons that we can affirm that support for the elderly is a community task and commitment. This commitment involves effective public policies for the elderly and their families, the work of NGOs in coordination with the various public services, and the people and services of the territory to cooperate along collaborative lines. It is necessary to deactivate stereotypes and create innovative solutions.

In Barcelona, the Conventions of the Elderly have been held, where proposals are worked on to reaffirm the importance of promoting a comprehensive approach in the adaptation of the city for all ages, Barcelona being one of the *Age-friendly Cities* as promoted by the WHO. This March was held in Barcelona the 6th Convention of "*Les Veus de les Persones Grans*", which is held every 4 being this year the 20th anniversary of the Convention.

In Barcelona we have District Councils for the Elderly in the 10 Districts of the City and the General Council of the Elderly of Barcelona, in which all the groups of elderly in the city are represented and which establish the frameworks of action of the City Council of Barcelona and draw the priority lines to be worked on in the city, as well as collective proposals that are raised to higher public bodies or institutions: either in the Plenary of the City Council, in the Congress of Deputies, or where appropriate.

Collaborative strategies with multisectoral characteristics are necessary, which require active aging policies, based on the principle that aging is a lifelong process that concerns all generations. These strategies must be developed through the creation of frameworks of commitment and co-responsibility with the social nets of the cities, favoring solidarity between generations, as established in the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, already in the year established aspects such as lifelong learning and the importance of the family network among other aspects. In fact, aging does not start at retirement age, but much earlier.

It is essential to carry out and offer all kinds of workshops and courses, provide continuous opportunities for lifelong learning (just as a worker in a company requires) offering different visions of the elderly different from the stereotyped ones. It should be considered that each stage of life and each change in the life cycle requires the same adaptation process as that of aging.