



Equality for Older People: Older People for Equality

Discussion Paper for A Fair Society for All? Listening to the Voices of Older People

Croke Park, 10 September 2019

Context

How existing inequalities impact on us as we age is something Age Action is beginning to explore through our panel discussion on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting 10 September *A Fair Society For All? Listening to the Voice of Older People*. This Discussion Paper serves as an input to that discussion.

United Nations International Day of Older Persons on 1 October 2019 focuses on the Journey to Equality. The 2019 theme is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 and will focus on pathways of coping with existing and preventing future old age inequality. SDG 10 sets to reduce inequality within and among countries and aims to “ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome,” including through measures to eliminate discrimination, and to “empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.”

Often, inequalities experienced by older people reflect an accumulated disadvantage which can be as a result of factors such as socio-economic status, health, gender, location.

The groups covered by equality legislation each have a specific shared situation, experience and identity. Older people may share common experiences in terms of ageing and ageism but, in regard to identity, older people are not an homogenous group and encompass a variety of identities, for example, women, Black and ethnic minorities including Travellers, people with disabilities, and people under the LGBTI+ umbrella.

Inequality and disadvantage are often present or experienced at an early life stage. They can accumulate over the life course. Given their diverse identities, equality, therefore, cannot be achieved for older people without achieving equality for all, throughout the life course.

This presents opportunities for, and a challenge to, leadership. In their pursuit of equality, older people and their representative organisations are in a position to dismantle the fragmentation across specific identities that can undermine demands for a more equal society. They hold the potential for a new kind of leadership for equality that could bring forward new agendas for change.

Equality for Older People

Equality for older people, as with other groups, must go beyond the concerns with fairness and tolerance associated with equality of opportunity. Fairness can sit too comfortably with ongoing inequality, once some minimum standards are secured for older people. Equality for older people is concerned with outcomes across the economic, political, cultural and social domains; to use the language of our equality legislation, this substantive form of equality could be termed the achievement of full equality in practice.

Equality for older people, with the socio-economic diversity that characterises them as a group and the risk of economic disadvantage that can accrue at the end of one's working life, requires an integration of anti-poverty and economic equality measures. It requires equal attention to identity-based cultural equality measures. Equality for older people requires the re-distribution of: resources; power and influence; status and standing; and respect. Cultural inequality, that of status and standing, however, is a core and determining driver for these inequalities experienced by older people.

Future Directions for Equality

The pursuit of a more equal society now requires: going beyond a concern to alleviate poverty to include action seeking more ambitious outcomes of economic equality; action for equality that includes action seeking to achieve cultural change; and an approach to inter-generational solidarity that includes joint action on issues of shared concern.

Concern for economic equality has largely been limited to the alleviation of poverty, minimum income, or provision for basic needs. The focus has largely been on targeting those most in need and ensuring some form of minimum standard. This is important, but it is far from the achievement of full equality in practice and, as such, is less than effective in achieving change.

Economic equality would require a concern to address income inequality by, for example, putting boundaries on high wages as well as addressing low wages. Research indicates that societies characterised by greater levels of income equality are better for everyone, not just those affected by inequality. Economic equality would require the effective taxation of wealth

and profits for reinvestment in effective and efficient public services. It would involve a valuing of all types of work and of paid and unpaid work.

The pursuit of cultural change is of central importance in implementing equality for older people. This has yet to receive the attention it merits. Ageism undermines the status and standing of older people through individual attitudes and institutional systems rooted in false and generalised assumptions and stereotypes on age, ageing, and older people. Diminished status and standing limits access to resources, power and influence, and respect.

Concern for cultural change is a shared agenda across a range of groups experiencing inequality. Cultural change needs to come more centre stage in the pursuit of a more equal society. This requires a focus on the values that are engaged and prioritised in society and its institutions, with a concern to embed the values of dignity, autonomy, inclusion, participation, social justice and environmental justice that motivate a concern for equality across all domains. It involves countering stereotypes, false assumptions and hatred by bringing forward alternative narratives based on these values.

Public discourse and institutional culture are the terrain for this search for change. Mainstream and social media, political discourse, marketing and advertising, and organisational values are among the sites where change needs to be secured. Civil society communication, and the values it engages, becomes a tool for advancing social change, on a par with others such as policy advocacy, service provision or community development. Institutional systems and the values that they carry become a tool for advancing social change and need to be a focus for attention.

Intergenerational solidarity has largely been characterised and pursued as a form of mutual support and interaction between age groups. This is a limited vision and it is not clear that it is effective in creating solidarity. Solidarity needs to be embedded in shared interests and given expression in joint endeavours in pursuit of these shared interests. Equality is one such shared interest. Environmental justice and planetary survival is another, with new and creative campaigns already evident from young people such as the school strikes. Housing, homelessness, and the right to remain at home as we age is another.

Older People for Equality

New agendas need to be explored and created by older people and their organisations to pursue these future directions of advancing economic equality, working for cultural change and building intergenerational solidarity for a sustainable future.

These agendas are interconnected in that economic equality and cultural change enable a societal resilience in the face of challenges, such as climate change, economic recession, growing urbanisation. New strategies, tactics and tools have to be devised capable of achieving intergenerational solidarity and bringing about change, and the skills to apply them have to be supported.

This requires innovation and creation on the part of older people and their organisations, and of civil society organisations more widely.

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Alliance-forming, platform-building, and network-creation needs to be a concern for civil society organisations. These agendas will not be effectively pursued by any individual organisation on their own. They will depend on coherent and consistent action across all strands of civil society, involving as many organisations as possible. This requires leadership and drive that could be offered by older people and their organisations.

This brings the value of solidarity centre stage, a value that, once prioritised, motivates the creation and pursuit of shared agendas and strategies for change. A shared definition of solidarity and agreement on its implications for organisational priorities, process and practice, is needed to ensure this value is effectively engaged by a wide range of organisations.

A new perspective on power and power relations is demanded of older people and their organisations, and of civil society more widely. This involves moving from the current prioritising of an engagement with and attempt to persuade those in power to a prioritising of civil society action to change power relations.

This would require investing civil society resources in building power from the ground up to seek change rather than continuing to prioritise efforts to lobby the holders of power. Mobilisation, engagement and coordination are key in this regard.