



**Communities for All Ages: A life course  
approach to strengthening communities  
in Northern Ireland**

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February 2015

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# **Communities for All Ages: A life course approach to strengthening communities in Northern Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

In October 2014, I had the privilege of serving as an ARK Ageing Programme Visiting Fellow at Queen's University Belfast. The fellowship, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, provided an opportunity for me to participate in conferences in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, visit several intergenerational programs with staff from Linking Generations Northern Ireland (LGNI), and meet with a variety of researchers, policy makers and human service practitioners to explore how intergenerational strategies could help strengthen communities in Northern Ireland. This paper describes the Communities for All Ages initiative that was developed in the United States in 2002 and explores ways an "all ages" lens could be applied to policies and practices in Northern Ireland.

## **Communities for All Ages: Overview**

Communities for All Ages (CFAA), developed by The Intergenerational Center at Temple University, is a national initiative that utilises an intergenerational and life course lens for community building. The CFAA model promotes a vision, a lens and a framework for creating communities that are good for growing up and growing older. The vision imagines places which intentionally engage people across generational, racial and ethnic differences in civic and community life and promote quality supports and environmental design for all ages. The lens is a way of thinking that emphasises values of interdependence, reciprocity and collective responsibility. The framework outlines strategies that improve outcomes for all generations, particularly vulnerable children, families and elders.

The Communities for All Ages framework, conceptualized in 2002, builds on the concept of a "Society for All Ages" described by UN Secretary General Kofi Anan as:

*"multigenerational, [not] fragmented, with youths, adults, and older persons going their separate ways...rather, it is age-inclusive, with different generations recognizing and acting upon their commonality of interest" (Anan, 1999).*

To operationalise the key elements of a "Society for All Ages" at the neighborhood level, literature related to age-friendly, child-friendly and family-friendly community initiatives was reviewed, and focus groups with ageing and youth practitioners were conducted. A set of common concerns across age groups emerged related to education/lifelong learning, health/social services, family support, public safety, and opportunities for civic engagement (Henkin et al., 2005). In 2003, the Intergenerational Center partnered with the Arizona Community Foundation to pilot Communities for All Ages in five neighbourhoods. With subsequent funding from other local and national foundations, the CFAA Network expanded to include 23 communities in eight states.

Rather than addressing a specific age group, the Communities for All Ages model intentionally brings together organisations representing diverse groups and residents of all ages (not just young and old) to engage in efforts that promote the common good across the life course. The 23 neighborhoods in the Communities for All Ages Network engaged in a three-step process of assessment, planning and implementation, with technical assistance from the Intergenerational Center. During assessment, each local site developed a collaborative team including staff from organisations representing different constituencies (for example, ageing, education, immigrant groups, family services, faith based, community development, and neighbourhood associations), policy makers and residents of multiple generations. Using intergenerational assessment tools, such as focus group questions, surveys and asset mapping, the teams collected data, identified major issues of concern to all generations, and developed community profiles that summarised their findings. Based on this profile and community feedback, each team identified an issue to use as their “doorway” into the community building process (such as improving health, increasing neighborhood safety, enhancing education and life-long learning). Four key strategies were used across all sites: 1) identifying outcomes for all age groups; 2) building cross-sector alliances; 3) engaging residents of all ages in leadership roles; and 4) creating places, practices and policies that support cross-age interaction.

Communities for All Ages produced two types of outcomes. Firstly, improved individual well-being in a particular issue area identified by local communities as important to multiple generations (for example, health and safety). Secondly, increased capacity of residents and organisations to apply cross-generational strategies to a range of community issues. A participatory cross-site evaluation documented the network’s substantial progress towards these outcomes.

### **Context: Applicability of “all ages” approach to Northern Ireland**

As in the United States, there are a number of trends in Northern Ireland, outlined below, that underscore the value of using an “all ages” approach to enhance existing initiatives related to ageing, children and youth, good relations, health, and safety.

#### **The demographic imperative**

Globally, the number of older people is expected to more than double (from 841 million in 2013 to more than 2 billion in 2050), exceeding the number of children for the first time by 2047 (United Nations, 2013). The older-age support ratios (the number of working age adults per older person in population) are low, especially in more developed countries, and expected to fall further. This changing support ratio may impact, among other things, the service use and income supports for older adults relative to the taxes contributed by working age residents. The shifting ratio will place greater responsibility on young people to support older adults than in any previous generation.

Mid-Year Population Estimates for 2013 indicate that the 60+ and the 0-15 population each currently represent approximately 20% of the 1,830,000 residents (OFMDFM, 2014) It is projected that by 2027 the older population will be larger than the children/youth population. Developing strategies for strengthening the intergenerational social compact, expanding

services to support older people, and creating opportunities for older adults to contribute to their communities are increasingly important critical as the older population grows.

Rapid population aging is not the only trend altering Northern Ireland's demographics; the level of immigration to Northern Ireland has also increased. The percentage of the population who were born outside the United Kingdom (UK) more than doubled from 1.8 percent in 2001 to 4.5 percent in 2011 (Devine and Robinson, 2014), with the largest ethnic minorities from Eastern Europe (Poland and Lithuania) followed by Chinese and Irish Travellers (McAreavey, 2013). Most immigrants live in the west and southwest of Northern Ireland. A recent rise in hate crimes suggests that efforts are needed to create more welcoming communities that connect residents across ethnic, racial and generational divides.

### **Shrinking government resources**

Austerity measures are having a major impact on individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland and creating a more unequal society. The Centre for Social Justice, in its 2010 *Breakthrough Northern Ireland* publication, reported high rates of unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction, and domestic violence and highlighted the need to “tackle the underlying drivers of poverty and interrupt cycles of intergenerational social exclusion” (Centre for Social Justice, 2010). Despite the severity of some of these issues, government funding for programmes and services is decreasing and private sources of funding are very limited.

The silo-ed nature of the government departments in Northern Ireland makes it challenging to develop initiatives that cross populations or issue areas. Although many of the policy frameworks (for example, Good Relations, or Active Ageing) fall under the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), there seem to be few vehicles for cross-departmental collaboration and joint funding. In addition, NGOs may find themselves competing with each other for limited resources and, for example, inadvertently pitting the needs of the young against the needs of older adults.

### **A divided society**

Northern Ireland, like the United States, is a country with deep historical divides which can reinforce separation, suspicion and unequal opportunities for religious and political groups. Differences in how each generation was affected by the Troubles and the ways in which traumatic experiences are communicated from generation to generation complicates efforts to move toward a shared society “characterized by equity, respect for diversity and recognition of interdependence among citizens” (Zeldin, Wilson and Collura, 2011, p. 405). According to a report by the Irish Peace Centres, “often families collude to maintain silence which can inhibit discussion of sensitive topics” (Irish Peace Centres, 2010, p. 12). Children who are not able to discuss the past are left on their own to grapple with complex issues. Many have difficulty interacting with others who are different from them when they see adults viewing each other as “less deserving” (Zeldin, Wilson and Collura, p. 406). Although there are many good relations programmes in schools, the messages of tolerance and respect are sometimes undermined by older family members who are still dealing with the hurts of the past. Developing ways to

foster meaningful cross-age communication within families and engage all generations in community peace keeping efforts could enhance efforts to move toward a shared future.

Societal divisions are also reflected in the age-segregated activities and institutions that tend to reinforce ageist attitudes by restricting opportunities for older and younger persons to form stable, interdependent, cross-age relationships. Negative stereotyping of young people, particularly by older adults who are fearful of being victimised, is common. Zeldin and colleagues (2011) point to the negative consequences stemming from the marginalisation of youth, particularly those living in poverty, and emphasise the need to create supportive environments in which young people can develop skills and contribute to the broader society. Older people, too, are often viewed as a drain on society's resources rather than an asset and ageing is seen as a time of decline rather than development.

## **Opportunities**

### **Creating a shared agenda**

An “all ages” lens has great potential to support efforts that address a wide range of community issues and help move toward a vision of an inclusive society. Currently there are numerous initiatives that are working separately to improve life for target populations or around specific issues. Although each has a distinct vision and strategic plan, the principles of cohesion, diversity, interdependence, respect, inclusion, and fairness underpin many of them. Collaborative efforts involving government agencies and NGOs that work with different populations, as well as residents of all generations, are at the core of an all age approach. However the silo-ed nature of government agencies (for example, separate agencies for policy and service delivery) in Northern Ireland, as in the United States, makes it difficult to create a shared agenda to address specific community problems. Conducting a thorough analysis of current initiatives related to ageing, children and youth, good relations, health, safety and education would help determine how this lens could add value to each framework and identify potential areas of convergence and collaboration across the various initiatives. For example, there are clear opportunities to more intentionally connect the Active Ageing, Good Relations, and Anti- Poverty initiatives which all fall under the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, yet seem to work independently.

Listed below are examples of how an all ages approach could add value to each existing initiatives. These ideas build upon the important work of Linking Generations Northern Ireland (LGNI). By fostering cross-sector collaborations, developing cross-age programs, and training practitioners, LGNI has raised awareness about the potential of intergenerational practice to address community concerns and demonstrated the impact of this work on individuals, organisations and communities. While LGNI has been successful in including intergenerational language into some government policy frameworks, few resources have been allocated to implement all ages strategies into the initiatives outlined below. Joint funding of projects that explicitly encourage the inclusion of an all ages component would provide incentives and resources for this work.

### *Good Relations*

*Together: Building a United Community* (OFMDFM, 2013) is an initiative developed by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to improve community relations. Priority areas of work include education, housing, youth volunteering, and sports; but there is no mention of how older adults might work with youth to help promote tolerance and healing. Expanding the focus from youth volunteering to adult-youth partnership and actively engaging the ageing network in the work of the proposed Equality and Good Relations Commission are areas that could be explored.

### *Ageing*

*Active Ageing* (OFMDFM, 2014a) is a draft strategy by OFMDFM that stresses the importance of helping people as they age “to live actively and to their fullest potential”. The document emphasises the need to think about today’s and tomorrow’s older people. Although there are no new resources for this effort, there is great potential to work with national health and youth-focused initiatives to promote healthy living across the life course.

*Age-friendly Belfast*, an initiative overseen by the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership, envisions Belfast as a “city where older people live life to the full”. The *Age-friendly Belfast Plan 2014-2017* (Belfast Strategic Partnership, 2014) focuses on three key themes: age-friendly image (positive view of ageing), age-friendly lives (reducing inequalities and isolation), and age-friendly neighborhoods. This plan identifies the potential to work with child-friendly community efforts, but it is unclear if collaborative efforts have been initiated or if universities, secondary schools or youth councils are involved in any way. Inviting representatives from schools, universities and/or youth development organisations to be part of planning an age-friendly community is one concrete step that could build a broader base of support for people as they age.

### *Health*

*Making Life Better* (DHSSPS, 2014) is a 10 year public health strategic framework for improving the health and well-being of people in Northern Ireland and reducing health inequities. It focuses on underlying social determinants of health, children and young people, and supporting transitions thorough adulthood and older age. Infusing intergenerational approaches into health education, prevention strategies, and efforts to reduce health inequities would enhance this important initiative.

Belfast has been designated as a World Health Organization Healthy City since 1988. This work is now in Phase VI (2014 -2018) of implementation, which focuses on health equity, investing in health though the life course, and creating resilient communities and supportive environments. Both child-friendly places and older people are identified as priorities and the plan emphasises prevention. There could be numerous opportunities to build new partnerships and engage all ages in improving physical and social environments.

## *Poverty*

*Delivering Social Change* is a framework set up by the Northern Ireland Executive that seeks to coordinate key actions across government departments to “deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages and secure an improvement in children and young people’s health, well-being and life opportunities thereby breaking the long term cycle of multi-generational problems” (<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/delivering-social-change/delivering-social-change-introduction.htm>). Value could be added to its six signature programmes (which include community and direct family support, as well as nurture units for young children) by examining child poverty within an intergenerational context, funding projects that support caregiving families at all stages of the life cycle, and working with the ageing and health networks to address root causes of poverty for all generations.

## *Safety*

*Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities* is the community safety strategy for 2012-2017 (Department of Justice, 2012), and focuses on reducing crime, anti-social behavior and fear in Northern Ireland. Its emphasis on prevention and trust building are clearly aligned with the intergenerational work already being done by LGNI. In addition to reducing negative age-related stereotypes and promoting community safety through intergenerational programming, it is important to use a life course lens when examining the social determinants of crime.

## **Assessment questions**

The following questions could be explored within each initiative:

- What are the major issues being addressed by this initiative and how are different generations affected by these issues?
- How can organisations and residents representing different ages be engaged in the planning and implementation process?
- How can resources (including physical space and funding) be utilised in ways that will benefit multiple populations as opposed to single target age groups?
- How can policies be developed that foster intergenerational interdependence instead of pitting generations against each other?

## **Planning across ages**

The reorganisation of local councils across Northern Ireland offers an opportunity to use an “all ages” lens in assessment and planning at a local level. With a larger population in each new council district, it is particularly important to ensure that all voices are heard and innovative planning strategies are employed. Gathering data from multiple generations about what makes a city good for growing up and growing older, and intentionally engaging residents of all ages and representatives from government agencies and NGOs in the development of concrete community plans, will hopefully lead to the design of enabling environments that meet needs across the life course. This process can also identify common concerns and “economies of scope”. These are single solutions that address multiple challenges (such as multi-generational community centres, or school buses that can be used to transport older adults while school is in session). Local councils also have the potential to develop age-integrated, rather than age-segregated, service delivery systems that promote the efficient use of resources (for example, respite care for caregivers across the life course).



## **Building capacity**

In order to transform an “all ages” vision into practice, it is important to consider strategies for building the capacity of resident leaders, NGOS, educators, health and social service practitioners to engage in intergenerational work. LGNI has been instrumental in providing training to organisations around intergenerational practice. Offering a series of *regional* trainings in each local council district could help key stakeholders learn how to leverage the talents and skills of multiple generations, analyse the interconnectedness of issues across generations, and effectively facilitate cross- generational communication. The Leadership for All Ages training curriculum and the Communities for All Ages Resource Guide, developed by the Intergenerational Center at Temple University, are additional resources that can support these efforts.

## **Increasing opportunities for lifelong community engagement and learning**

A continuum of opportunities for individuals of all ages to engage in civic work is an important component of an all age community. Building an infrastructure for lifelong volunteering within each local council district could foster local ties and address specific neighbourhood needs. This would include creating an integrated system for recruiting, training and supporting volunteers of all ages rather than working separately with youth and older adults. In addition, developing specific volunteer opportunities in national or regional health, ageing, education, and good relations initiatives would build public awareness about challenges facing diverse populations and supplement other services. Volunteering in schools to support children’s academic achievement, serving as health or job coaches to young adults, mentoring vulnerable youth or immigrant families, or working with parents and young children on pre-school readiness are just a few of the many roles older adults could play in their communities. Similarly, young people could teach technology to elders, help older immigrants learn English, provide respite support to families caring for frail elders, and perform chore services to help older neighbours remain independent. Building adult-youth partnerships and engaging in collective action to address community problems are effective ways of more fully integrating young people and older adults into their communities. In areas like restorative justice, intergenerational engagement is seen as critical to moving toward a more reconciled future. Intergenerational entrepreneurship is also emerging as a viable strategy for economic development.

The value of lifelong learning is gaining increased attention throughout Europe. The European Union, in its 2020 plan, highlights the importance of building a cohesive society and ensuring access and opportunities for all throughout the lifecycle (European Commission, 2010, p.16). It specifically encourages member nations to strengthen employment education and training programmes by providing opportunities to acquire and develop new skills throughout the course.

### **Creating shared spaces that build social capital across ages**

Concerted efforts are necessary to create spaces where young, middle aged and older people from all walks of life can interact and build mutual respect. Examples of shared spaces include schools that function as centres for lifelong learning, libraries that offer cross-generational activities, adult-child day care centers, all age community centres rather than youth or older adult centres, and public parks that support healthy development for all ages. However space alone is not enough to foster trust and build relationships. Programming that intentionally fosters social connectedness and reflects an understanding of generational interests and preferences is needed to overcome the negativity and ageist attitudes that prevail in many communities.

### **Raising public awareness**

Articulating and promoting a vision of Northern Ireland as an inclusive, safe, healthy, and equitable place for people of all ages and backgrounds is an important part of moving the “all age” concept forward. A *public awareness campaign* that focuses on the assets of different generations and highlights the ways they can serve as resources to each other and their communities is a concrete step that might contribute to a change in attitudes and behaviour. This would require the use of language that communicates the concept of “shared fate”, an understanding of what messages resonate and motivate multiple generations, and champions who represent multiple sectors.

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### **Useful links**

ARK Ageing Programme

<http://www.ark.ac.uk/ageing>

Communities for All Ages

<http://www.communitiesforallages.org/>

Intergenerational Center, Temple University

<http://templeigc.org/>

Linking Generations Northern Ireland

<http://www.centreforip.org.uk/northern-ireland>

## ARK Ageing Programme

The ARK Ageing Programme is a resource within ARK to support engagement between the age and academic sectors. We do this by encouraging and facilitating the production of research that will support lobbying and advocacy, and the sophisticated use of information and evidence by the age sector. In addition, we aim to embed ageing research within Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

This programme of work will transfer existing knowledge between the academic, policy and voluntary and community sectors, as well as identify and fill key research and information gaps. These activities will be wide ranging, such as:

- recording public attitudes to ageing issues,
- undertaking secondary analysis of key datasets,
- holding research seminars and policy round tables on key issues identified by the age sector,
- running research workshops for the voluntary and community sectors,

Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, as well as Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, this programme of work will run from October 2013 to December 2016.

For more information, visit [www.ark.ac.uk/ageing](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ageing) or find us on Facebook

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