

## THE SOURCES OF INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION WITHIN SOCIAL WORK

**Abstract.** *The changes affecting the aging society over the past decades have been reflected in the field of social work. Social work in Slovenia occupies an important place in various forms of care for older people and in so doing it implements the principles of the Strategy of Care for the Elderly Until 2010 – Solidarity, Good Intergenerational Relations and Quality Aging of the Population. The broad network of care for older people depends on intergenerational cooperation, since most assistance to the older generation is provided by the middle generation employed in the care sector, with the younger generation being included through various forms of volunteer work. Within social work, the opportunities and possibilities for intergenerational linking are perceived on various levels: first, on the micro level, implying intergenerational solidarity on the level of family and social networks; second, on the meso level of a community, and third, on the macro level of society as a whole. This calls for the integration of measures taken on the national level with those taken on the other two levels, and creates an autonomous and legitimate space enabling the State to adopt the kind of policy that encourages intergenerational solidarity. Social work operates on all these levels, exploiting its particular knowledge about intergenerational collaboration.*

**Keywords:** *aging, intergenerational solidarity, generations, social policy, social work, social networks, care for older people.*

### Longer life expectancy – the pride of our civilization

The rapid aging of the population and the simultaneous decline in the share of young people in the population has had a serious effect on the (thus far) rather stable systems in the western world. Much like the majority of EU

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member states, Slovenia has been experiencing changes over the past decades affecting its long-lived society. Demographic data for the EU and Slovenia show that the number of people over 65 is on the rise. Today, Slovenia has 16.4% of people over 65, with the share of the oldest old, i.e. those over 80, also increasing rapidly. Towards the end of 1995, Slovenia's population 65 years of age and over numbered 249,046 people, and they accounted for 12.5% of the total population. In 2008, this age group accounted for almost one fifth of the population, and according to Europop 2008 projections, by 2060 its share will amount to 35% of the total population (Vertot, 2008: 16).

Phenomena such as longer life expectancy, medical advances, reduction in the percentage of active population and a rise in the percentage of people dependent on care are accompanied by changes in family life and inter-generational relationships. Contemporary debates about old age often veer in the direction of demographic changes. The rise in the share of older people across the world is a consequence of a specific demographic phenomenon characteristic of modern societies; i.e., a shift from high to low birth and mortality rates. Data for Slovenia indicate an increase in the number of older people. On the other hand, the share of younger people is seriously in decline – the 2002 census data show that the share of young people (between 0 and 14 years of age) was barely higher than the share of older people 65 years of age and over. The forecasts for the future do not predict a growing trend in favour of the share of young people.

Demographic changes, dubbed the demographic scare by some, are often publicly presented as a threat to the younger population, despite the fact that longer life expectancy is an achievement not experienced by any previous generation. Indeed, it is one of the greatest achievements of our civilization, of which we should be proud, and yet this is not how we think of it. Instead, the aging of the population is often described as a problem that has pervaded all spheres of contemporary society, forcing countries across the world to seek adequate solutions. The picture, however, takes on an additional dimension when we take into account the fact that the growing share of older people in the total population comes along with a lower birth rate. Consequently, as the number of people over 65 rises sharply, the number of young people under 15 sharply declines. The crux of the matter is not solely that the population has been aging, but even more so that the balance between the shares of young and older people has been upset, which in turn has jeopardized the sustainability of the existing systems of care and social security which depend on it. However, instead of taking a common viewpoint on the phenomenon, discussing it as a positive process and identifying within it the resources for harmonious living, we instead problematize it, present it as a threat to humankind and push it to the margins, ignoring and neglecting everything that is related to old age.

Numerous mutually conditioned social processes influence the situation of the older population. Among these, the process of individualization is of key importance, as it undermines intergenerational solidarity. The basic social unit is no longer a family but an individual. Individualization increases the individual's awareness of autonomous decisions taken independently from the group to which he/she belongs, and ascribes to the individual greater significance.

The social support provided by social networks has a positive influence on the functioning and psyche of older people. It eases the tensions caused by stress and acts favourably on their general health. However, in today's society family life has been experiencing many changes. Below we list some of these:

1. Parents have fewer children than in the past, so they are confronted with the »empty nest« syndrome earlier in their lives. Although the birth rate has been increasing over the past four years, Slovenia, with a birth rate of 1.38 children per woman of reproductive age, still copes with this reduced fertility, much like many other European countries. Indeed, Slovenia belongs in the group of European countries with the lowest birth rate (Vertot, 2008: 42).
2. The number of divorces is increasing, as is the numbers of one-person households and one-parent families. The 2002 census showed that 25.3% of people in the age group over 65 lived alone (in one-person households); of these, 11.4% were men and 33.5% were women. The shares of women in the age groups over 70 who live alone are invariably greater than 33%, and the greatest in the age group 80–84 (41.8%), while the share of men in this age group who live alone is only 15.3% (op. cit.: 47).
3. With the prolongation of life span, the period during which older people live with their partners or alone (in one-person households) is also prolonged. Until the age of 65, the majority of men and women still live with their spouses. In the age group over 65, and particularly the one over 80, the share of widowed individuals is conspicuously higher than that of single persons or persons who live with their spouses, and there are more widowed women than men (op. cit.: 45).
4. The idealized and romantic image of a grey-haired grandma resting in her reclining chair is a thing of the past. On average, grandmothers are active, employed and can hardly spare time to look after their grandchildren. In 2007, the average and actual retirement age at which one could claim the old age pension was 57 years and 7 months for women (op. cit.: 50). During the period 2000–2007, the number of retired women in the age group 50–54 and 55–59 decreased because the years of service were extended by law, while their number in higher age groups was increasing.

5. The number of people in the oldest age group has been increasing sharply. According to some forecasts, between 2005 and 2050, the number of people over 80 in Slovenia will rise by 3 %, i.e. it will amount to 10.6 % of the total population. This means that the number of people who usually need intensive care and nursing will increase dramatically. Such nursing and care can be adequately provided only through the collaboration of families and state institutions.

Despite the said changes, the family continues to be an important partner within informal networks of care. It still provides the basic framework for life and death. The success of assistance to the ill or to healthy older people depends on the carer's sensitivity to distress, his/her ability to show compassion and to create in older people a feeling of acceptance and belonging. However, the extended families that once provided assistance to older people no longer exist. Postmodern family relations frequently lead families to reject care for their older members and to transfer their responsibility to health and social services. Older people therefore often feel alone, useless, redundant, isolated and rejected, and seek help in institutions such as homes for older people. These generally display the characteristics of total institutions (Goffman, 1961) and cannot compensate for the cosy atmosphere of a domestic environment. Consequently, the aging of the population has been transformed from the pride of our civilization into its main problem, which serves to justify the necessity of care provided by the state and by various professional and informal networks catering for older people. At the same time, western society realized that there was no interconnection among generations. This conclusion, although alarming, is vital for our recognition of the importance and role of older people in contemporary societies. The modern way of life that glorifies productivity, efficiency and the hunt for profit undermines the value of intergenerational links. People belonging to the young, middle and older generations only rarely interrelate at work, for entertainment or through other forms of cooperation. The fast developing sciences with their resulting knowledge have superseded the experience and wisdom of older people, indirectly reducing the value of old age and aggravating the situation of older people. Concomitantly, the mechanisms for intergenerational communication are still absent. Young people frequently do not have opportunities to establish communication with older people, and when they do have these communication fails to get off the ground. Yet, despite the advancement of science and technology, man continues to be a social being needing contact and interaction with other people and the passing of knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next (Mali, 2009: 245). It is important to research and put into practice methods that will enable the co-existence of the three generations and solidarity

among them, be it called intergenerational collaboration or something else. The emphasis is on intergenerational solidarity and on acts and behaviour aimed at finding and implementing the approaches that lead to a meaningful quality of common life. Intergenerational collaboration is the basis of society because the existence and development of the latter depend on it.

### War or solidarity between generations?

With the increase in the share of older people, we have become attentive to the phenomena that accompany old age, aging and older people. At the turn of the 20th century, the main »social issue« in industrialized countries was finding a solution to the situation of the working class. At the turn of the 21st century, the situation of the working class ceased to be the main political and social issue and was replaced by the question of how to establish intergenerational collaboration and solidarity. Slovenia is no exception in this respect. In the circumstances of global crisis that affect our life at present, we could say that the questions of intergenerational collaboration and of the working class situation are of equal importance. The balance between the two issues opens new opportunities for the promotion of intergenerational cooperation, since on the one hand, employment has become a life-long situation that extends into the ever-later periods of human life, and on the other, at a time of high unemployment, older people's incomes have become a source of support for the middle and younger generations. And the ways and forms that speak in favour of intergenerational cooperation do not end here.

More importantly, when we consider intergenerational collaboration with a view to achieving intergenerational cohesion, we should ask ourselves whether it is at all sensible to divide life into individual chronological segments, or chronological periods that set the boundaries between individual generations. The modern way of life that enables increasingly longer vitality teaches us that youth has begun to overlap with what used to be considered middle age, and the boundary between middle age and old age has been similarly blurred. As a result, the question of what old age is, when and how it starts entirely depends on individual circumstances.

Naturally, this manner of thinking calls into question the division into generations as we have known it in the past as well as the related understanding of intergenerational collaboration. If we take as the point of departure the definition of a generation in the Dictionary of Standard Slovene Language<sup>1</sup> ([http://bos.zrc-sazu.si/cgi/a03.exe?name=sskj\\_testa&expression=generacija&hs=1](http://bos.zrc-sazu.si/cgi/a03.exe?name=sskj_testa&expression=generacija&hs=1)), generations are groups of people of approximately the

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<sup>1</sup> We use it for the purpose of this article, describing intergenerational collaboration in Slovenia

same age, who live during the same time period and have similar interests or views. This definition is rather flexible, and it creates room for discussion off the changes affecting the until-now dominant concept of generations. Below is our attempt to approach it in a novel way.

One's age is today indisputable, since it is calculated from birth onwards. One hundred years ago or so, when birth certificates were not stored as they are today, the determination of age was more uncertain. The division of people into age groups today is more accurate than it was in the past. The next category that defines generations is that of shared life periods. This category also poses several dilemmas, since owing to a longer life span, different generations live longer over the same time period. Take, for example, the division of life course into thirds as proposed by Kristančič (2005). This leaves us with 3 life periods, the first starting at birth and lasting until the age of 30, the second lasting from the age of 31 to 65, and the third from age 66 to 96 and over. If we superimpose onto this division the average life span, we can see that the length of periods during which people of different age groups live together has been increasing. In 1931, the average age of the population in the region of what is today Slovenia was 23.3 (22.3 for males and 24.1 for females). Three decades later the average age of the population was already 32 years (30.6 years for males and 33.3 years for females). At the 1991 census, people in Slovenia were 36.4 years of age on average (males = 34.7 and females = 38.0). At the end of 2006, the average age has risen to 40.8 years (42.5 among females and 39.2 among males). In all EU countries, life expectancy for women in 2050 is expected to be more than 80 (SURS, 2007). While this is promising in terms of a longer life span, these figures undermine the definition of generations on the basis of shared life periods. Eventually, we are left with only one category supporting the presented division, the one assuming similar interests and views. However, in contemporary societies it is precisely this dimension that can no longer define generations, since people's interests and views are explicitly individualistic, and more akin than in the past, thanks to contemporary technologies. Viewpoints, be it political, professional, religious or other, are a personal matter, not a generational one. Moreover, it is precisely within this category that collaboration among people of different ages is most frequent and most palpable, so it is not a category that draws boundaries among generations, but one that connects them.

The division of people into generations promotes differences among individual age groups rather than advantages, opportunities and challenges around which people's lives revolve. We could even say that it creates the conditions that produce the generation gap, which in the circumstances of the demographic aging of the population all too frequently appears as

a characteristic of contemporary society. Our time is one in which it is no longer important to which generation one belongs nor what his/her chronological age is. What is important is to explore and put into practice various forms of common life/existence and collaboration. This may be called intergenerational collaboration or something else, but the emphasis must be on cohesion and on directing our acts and behaviour towards seeking and realizing various forms of joint, quality and meaningful life.

### **Social work with older people and intergenerational collaboration**

The changes affecting the aging society have also been reflected within social work in recent decades. The segment of social work designated »social work with older people« in Slovenia, and elsewhere frequently referred to as »gerontological social work,« has experienced intense development. The definition used in Slovenia indicates that this kind of social work is understood as a special segment of social work with the elements of gerontology, while according to the second definition, it as a special segment of gerontology (Mali, 2008). Regardless of the definition, what is involved is an interdisciplinary approach creating an opportunity for the development of new methods within both social work and gerontology, and particularly for accumulating knowledge that will enable an efficient approach to the older generation.

According to Koskinen (1997: 8), social work with older people is so specific that because of its gerontological elements it can be seen as a sub – specialty of social work. I will begin with Koskinen's definition of the special features of social work with older people, which is based on the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon of aging as a combination of biological, psychological and social processes; these introduce certain changes in peoples' lives, because of which older people need specific forms of help. To work effectively with older people, social workers must have good knowledge about the aging process, social policies concerning older people and various practical approaches and methods. They also need various professional skills, for example, the ability to communicate with older people, to make judgements, participate in multi-disciplinary teams, establish connections among generations etc. When assessing the situation of an older person, a social worker needs a large amount of specific knowledge different from that needed within other areas of social work. The reason is that he/she must evaluate the psychological, emotional, cognitive and social abilities of older people, assess their potential for self-care, discover various sources of inner power within older people and their social environment, and identify possible obstacles within their supportive environment. This is where social work with older people differs from social work



with people in other age groups. Work with older people requires different values, knowledge and practical skills. Nevertheless, the powerful social construction of old age and prevailing prejudices against aging and older people may deceive social workers into the trap of acting contrary to the ethical norms of their profession, which poses ethical dilemmas, questions and problems for social work.

A social worker can improve interaction among older people and other members of the family and wider social environment. In recent years, the role of social workers in dealing with the relatives who care for older people with dementia is increasingly prominent. Social workers help these relatives reorganize their family lives in ways that are acceptable to all family members. They provide necessary information that can help relatives reorganize their lives, educate them to deal with people with dementia, and establish contacts between older people and their carers, on the one hand, and the formal community care networks, on the other.

Social workers know how to identify possibilities and opportunities for the positive evaluation of old age and take the establishment of intergenerational links as a challenge. They seek ways to establish and strengthen solidarity among generations at the level of the individual and the family where resources for overcoming the shortcoming in the area of interpersonal solidarity can be found. One of the main factors is the strengthening of intergenerational solidarity, which can take place on several levels: first, on the micro level of the family and social networks; second, on the meso level of the community, and third, on the macro level of society as a whole. The last level necessitates the linking of measures taken on the national level with those implemented on the other two levels and also opens for the state an autonomous and legitimate space for adopting the kind of policy that would encourage intergenerational collaboration. Social work reaches into all these three areas, owing to its specific kind of knowledge and knowledge about intergenerational collaboration. Rapoša Tajnšek (2007: 10) argues that social work can be successful only if it takes into account, in addition to the micro level (the individual, the family and the group), the meso level of the social environment, which includes informal and formal resources and assistance networks in one's living environment and community, as well as the macro level, which provides the social and political context for the consideration of social issues. The most important is the holistic understanding of older people and their needs, with an emphasis on the promotion of social work users as partners in the process of assistance provision, so that their right to choose the type of help they need is at the forefront of our attention (Mali, 2008). This approach is reflected in the development of new forms of home care for older people, and it also implies about changes within institutional forms of care.



### *The micro level of social work*

On the micro level, social work is concerned with how to establish and strengthen solidarity between generations on the level of the individual, within the family, where the resources needed to resolve deficient interpersonal solidarity are located. The mission of social workers working with older people is to improve older people's capabilities and capacities and consequently enable them to confront their difficulties and solve problems (Mali, 2008). In so doing, social workers adhere to certain principles of work, for example, seeking strengths, promoting maximum functioning, promoting a non-restrictive environment, promoting ethical practice, respecting cultural differences, working within a systemic perspective and setting appropriate goals (Burack-Weiss and Brennan, 1991). These principles point to the specific features of social work with older people which stem from a holistic approach to man and his needs, with an emphasis on the promotion of the users of social work as partners in the process of help provision and on their active role and cooperation with professionals, i.e. social workers, in finding solutions. Koskinen (1997) writes that social workers help older people by improving, through joint effort, older people's capacities and capabilities to confront difficulties and solve problems. This brings social workers face to face with various problems of old age such as vulnerability, dementia, extreme old age, loneliness, family distress, strained intergenerational relationships, various ethnic backgrounds, older people with special needs, blind older people, alcoholism in old age, widowhood in old age, stress of old age, suicidality among older people, violence, various sexual orientations, consequences of the Holocaust and other phenomena. What is always in the forefront, though, is work aimed at strengthening the social power of older people.

The perspective that places emphasis on individual power requires that social workers approach older people in a novel manner that shifts attention from individual problems to the search for new possibilities and opportunities in one's life. Trauma, pain and difficulty may also hold the seeds of hope and the potential for change. The perspective relying on individual power offers a simple formula: mobilize users' powers (talents, knowledge, capabilities and other resources) so that they can realize their visions and goals and therefore achieve a better quality of life in accordance with their own notions of quality. When mobilizing one's power, it is useful to consider how older people may contribute to the life of other generations. Their age, accumulated wisdom and experience constitute the source of their power and represent an important resource for the succeeding generations. The resources for intergenerational collaboration are located within ourselves. Unfortunately, the contemporary way of life prevents us from recognizing them. We need an external perspective, the view of a professional, for

example, a social worker, to alert us to these resources and present them in such a way that they become obvious so that we may exploit them in order to improve the quality of our collaboration.

### *The meso level of social work*

On the meso level, which implies cohesion within a community, social work has recognized new opportunities for intergenerational collaboration. It is a fact that our lives are inextricably linked to a community, but the questions we have to answer concern the best way is to improve intergenerational links within a community, the role of various organizations within communities, and how to activate the role of the local community and engage all protagonists in a joint effort leading to intergenerational collaboration. Social workers help older people and their families obtain assistance from various dedicated services in the given environment, therefore performing the role of service coordinators.

Over the past decade, social workers have worked intensely on the development of services and programs targeted at older people needing help in their everyday tasks and activities. We have formed a network of services and programs of social protection for older people. These services are provided by representatives of the middle generation, while the younger generation is included through various forms of volunteer work. This kind of help and care for older people is so far the most powerful form of intergenerational collaboration and cohesion known to us. It provides an excellent basis for overcoming the gap between generations and can serve as a model for good practices on which intergenerational collaboration should be built.

Knowledge about the social construction of the later stages of life enables social workers to identify various problems confronted by older people in contemporary society. Various programs and organizations for older people are equally dependent on the definition of these problems that is used by professionals working for these organizations to diagnose the problems and implement adequate measures to mitigate them. However, the mission of social work with older people is different. The method used by social workers represents one step further than the mere identification and mitigation of problems. Their goal is to help and support older people in exploiting their rich life experience in order to overcome difficulties. The emphasis is on individuals and their capacities and capabilities, rather than on problems, the resolution of which is, at any rate, the responsibility of specialized programs and services to whose development and interlinking social workers contribute through their knowledge about the needs of older people (Mali, 2008: 65).

There are three sectors of formal help for older people: (1) the public sector, where help is provided by centres for social work, older people's

homes, centres for assistance at home, and providers of other public services and forms of living, for example, sheltered housing; (2) the private sector, and (3) NGOs and volunteer organizations, for example, within the retired people's associations, self-help groups etc. Intergenerational links develop between the old and the middle generation engaged in these kinds of services. Employment is certainly one of the basic criteria for determining affinity with the middle generation. Since in recent years the age of first employment has shifted towards the age of 30, entry into the middle generation is also approaching this chronological age. Until their first job, either regular or limited term employment, the members of the young generation establish links with the older generation through volunteering in the formal help arrangements. To a certain extent, links among the three generations are present within intergenerational self-help groups. In other words, intergenerational collaboration already exists within various networks of help, so the task that lies before us is to put this intergenerational collaboration into words, to recognize it and develop it further.

### *The macro level of social work*

The macro level involves cohesion within society as a whole. It necessitates the linking of measures taken on the national level with activities undertaken on the other two levels, and at the same time it creates for the state an autonomous and legitimate space enabling it to adopt the kind of policy that will encourage intergenerational cohesion. The task of social workers is to contribute to the transformation of policies and resulting attitudes towards older people on the local and national levels (Koskinen, 1997: 11).

The issue of intergenerational relations is so acute in Slovenia that the state accorded it priority status by entitling the strategic document adopted in 2006 »The Strategy of Care for the Elderly Till 2010. Solidarity, Good Intergenerational Relations and Quality Aging of the Population.« If we now move on in our consideration of intergenerational links from the meso to the macro level of social work activities, it is possible to say that social workers in Slovenia endeavour to support and sustain the existing forms of care for older people in order to encourage intergenerational cooperation in the area of social protection. Within the field of institutional protection, which in Slovenia currently employs around 7,500 members of the middle generation, the state plans to enlarge the existing capacities by granting concessions and encouraging public-private partnership. The network of day care facilities is planned to be expanded to provide for an additional 0.3% of people over 65; similarly, expansion of the network for home assistance should cater for an additional 3% of people over 65, and sheltered housing for at least a further 0.5% of them. The expansion of services and forms of

help for older people is at the same time an opportunity for the young and middle generations to establish contacts with the older generation. Viewed from this perspective, the aging of the population is by no means a problem, but rather an opportunity for the young and middle generations to establish vitally needed contacts with older people.

Special attention within this Strategy is devoted to the development of new forms of incentives for intergenerational collaboration, on the level of both informal and formal help for older people. On the level of informal help, the family needs to be trained and educated to be able to provide quality help for older family members. On the level of formal help, the state has proposed the establishment of »local intergenerational centres that combine all public and civic capacities for quality aging and solidarity and good intergenerational relations in one location. The basic programs of the intergenerational centre are the following: various forms of training and help provided for the family with an older family member, day care, social home help, various forms of intergenerational volunteering, permanent awareness and training for local population programs in the field of care for quality aging and solidarity and good intergenerational relations, a local home for older people as well as sheltered housing« (MDDSZ, 2006: 21–22). In this part of the strategy, social work finds its place within both the formal and informal forms of help, which is evident from the description of the micro and meso levels of social work's operation. There already exist various forms of voluntary work that bring the young and middle generations in contact with the older generation, and the Strategy particularly emphasizes further encouragement of the existing systems of organized intergenerational volunteering, as well as an expansion of the modern forms of intergenerational socializing.

The said measures on the national level call for synergy and complementarity of all protagonists, i.e., individuals of various generations, the family, civil society, the volunteer sector, the market and the state. »When designing and implementing the programs for solidarity and good relations between generations and for quality aging, successful interaction between these subjects has to be achieved. Regarding the programs in the domain of the state, efficient interaction between all sectors and services relevant to the individual case (health, social security, police, etc.) must be achieved« (op. cit.: 39). The question that remains open is how to reduce the stigma attached to older people. It is strongly present in Slovenia, as confirmed by Eurobarometer data (Dernovšek, 2009), showing that one in every four Slovenes believes that older people are a burden on society. The findings of this research are by no means encouraging in the sense of eliminating the gap between the generations, but they may be a stimulus and a challenge for us to begin to build bridges between the generations.

Social workers endeavour to eliminate the discriminatory attitude towards older people (the English term frequently used to denote discrimination against older people is *ageism*; its Slovenian counterpart, *starizem*, has not yet become established) and empower older people to ensure their social, economic and political rights (Mali, 2008: 65). The practice of social work is aimed at eliminating prejudices against people, negative attitudes towards them and inappropriate approaches based on personal characteristics such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age or the like. The anti-discrimination approach is also a basic condition for the accomplishment of intergenerational solidarity, since generations that see each other as exclusionary – a phenomenon frequently encountered today – cannot achieve harmonious life together. Unfortunately, the implementation of the strategy in Slovenia is proceeding too slowly. At the end of the last year of the period defined in this strategy, only one fourth of the goals were accomplished (Mali and Nagode, 2009). One of reason is probably the lack of an anti-discriminatory attitude towards older people in Slovenia. And although the anti-discriminatory principle lies at the basis of social work, it is not sensible to ascribe responsibility for intergenerational acceptance to one profession only.

## Conclusion

People engaged in social work with older people endeavour to create conditions that can change the prevalent negative stance towards old age and aging. It is no longer possible to consider aging a special stage of life that is exceptionally and conspicuously negative, meaningless and unproductive. Aging is a part of our life without which our youth and experience accumulated through our middle age would be incomplete and isolated. Obviously, the era in which we live demands that we stop for a moment and take time to reconstruct and redefine our understanding of old age. The transitions from one stage of life to another have recently become blurred. The lifestyles that in the past characterized a particular age group or generation are no longer dependent on age. The lives of modern people are cyclic rather than linear. Our life courses no longer follow a fixed succession of events. Events intertwine, emerge and take place in different chronological orders, unpredicted and unplanned. It is precisely the cyclic nature of our lives that enables intergenerational linkage, the passing on of experience and the achievement of intergenerational solidarity. The fact that our lives are cyclic does not obliterate specific characteristics of individual generations; these continue to exist and demand our attention. However, if we learn to consider intergenerational relations in a way different from what has prevailed so far, particularly taking into account the capabilities and

capacities of older people, we will create conditions for the achievement of intergenerational solidarity needed for the future development of our society. Various examples of good practice indicate that such solidarity is possible, but to be able to implement it, all generations should master the kind of knowledge that is needed to develop appropriate conduct, provide adequate incentives and create opportunities.

Our consideration of the three levels of social work, the micro-, meso- and macro level, is intended to create an opportunity to discover potential solidarity among the three generations. Social work functions on all three levels, exploiting specific knowledge about intergenerational cooperation. It is possible to argue that social workers most frequently realize their mission through the services within the field of social protection, where they co-create solutions with individuals, families and social groups, within a community and in relation to the state. Social work cannot be restricted to one level only. Every change that an individual achieves with the help of a professional, or a social worker, is reflected on the other two levels as well as within relations with other professions and professionals dealing with older people. Social work endeavours to establish cooperation with these other areas, since a joint effort is the only path leading to quality intergenerational links and benefits for older people.

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