

Beyond the Bubble: Ageing, Solidarity and Covid-19

Article by Christa Möller-Metzger

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Elderly people have suffered not only the health impacts of this pandemic but also the isolation that comes with limited social contact. The pandemic has exposed many unresolved challenges for older members of society – social care, the digital divide, loneliness – but demographic ageing remains critically under-discussed. For Christa Möller-Metzger, Covid-19 is a chance for a new generational compromise built around connection, participation, and solidarity.

Alfons is from Gera, Germany, and is 84 years old. During the coronavirus lockdown, he did not see his wife for weeks. She lives in a nursing home and, from one day to the next, visits were banned. As she suffers from dementia and is hard of hearing, they couldn't speak on the phone. Before the crisis, he would visit her every day, hug her, and make sure she felt that she was not alone. For Alfons, not seeing his wife was a real struggle.

In time, the rules were relaxed and Alfons could visit his wife again. Alfons's story is one that many elderly people will recognise. In Hamburg, half of people aged 80 and above live alone. During the worst months of the health crisis, many scarcely dared to go outside, whether to do the shopping, see the doctor, or go to the bank. Apart from essential trips, they were advised to stay at home.

Statistically, the risk of developing severe Covid-19 symptoms increases with age. But Covid-19 does not only impact the elderly – rather, it affects those with certain pre-existing medical conditions worst. The exclusion of certain groups from social life – “shielding” – cannot be the answer.

Not only are undifferentiated assessments based on age overly simplistic (age is not always synonymous with poor health), they fail to account for the harmful consequences of excluding elderly people in our societies, already a problem at the best of times. Covid-19 has shown that there is much to be done to make our societies inclusive for people of all ages.

The loneliness pandemic

The principal coronavirus response has been to minimise personal contacts to reduce the spread of the virus. University of Edinburgh [research](#) spanning 27 countries found that older people avoided public transport and many no longer felt comfortable receiving guests for fear of infection. Limited possibilities for personal contact meant that people turned to digital tools, and for many elderly people the coronavirus crisis has been a chance to use social networks and messenger services like never before.

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Unfortunately, digital tools do not work everywhere or for everyone. [Germany's](#) digital divide is growing. People

who spent fewer years in education generally have reduced access to means of digital communication, and this is especially true for the elderly. People with low incomes may lack the hardware, internet connection, or the necessary skills. This disparity means that some miss out on increasingly crucial channels for participation in social life. As society ages and becomes more technologically oriented, digital inclusion will become an increasingly salient question. Easy-to-access online training and free internet for older people would go some way to preventing loneliness and exclusion.

As multigenerational households become less common in Europe, loneliness is growing, especially for the over-75s. Lonely people tend to be less healthy, more prone to dementia, and require more and earlier care. Poverty increases the risk of loneliness because many social activities come at a cost. The 2014 [ageing survey](#) in Germany found that a fifth of those affected by old-age poverty also experienced deep loneliness. For older people, poverty is often persistent as they have reduced opportunities to improve their financial situation, especially those who have been out of work for a long time. Women are particularly vulnerable to old-age poverty, as they are likely to have worked part-time or poorly paid jobs, or to have left employment to care for children or parents, resulting in lower pensions. The pension system ought to recognise care work and guarantee a decent life for all in old age.

A new model of care

Across Europe, care homes were Covid-19 hotspots. In [Belgium](#), residents of retirement and nursing homes represented half of the total fatalities (according to data from August 2020).⁴ But problems with the current care system go beyond infectious diseases. For many elderly people, entering a care home in their current form is not a desirable option.

Large homes are frequently run under tight budget constraints that leave little room for attentive care. Too often, the service is geared towards meeting basic needs, but little more. Staff often lack the time to care as they were trained to: with the aim of maintaining people's independence for as long as possible. Low pay and poor conditions across the sector mean that care workers are in short supply and overworked.

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The coronavirus crisis should be considered an opportunity to move away from a model of care provision based on large-scale homes. Care sector working conditions must be improved, with higher salaries and more thorough, specialised training that includes intercultural communication. Mental health and independence should be valued on par with physical wellbeing. The nursing home of the future should be open, allowing residents to be part of wider, multigenerational communities. Good outpatient care and the individual preferences of residents should be prioritised.

Helping hands

As terrible as the pandemic has been, it has been a source of greater cohesion and solidarity between generations. After all, the elderly people among those most at risk from the virus are not anonymous: they are Grandma and Grandad, Mum and Dad, Aunt and Uncle. Family ties are part of the reason why most people are happy to comply with government restrictions. Many younger people took it upon themselves to shop and run errands for elderly relatives or neighbours, welcome support that helped many older people to cope. Nevertheless, the ability to live independently is an asset that should not be underestimated. Older people have the right to make informed choices

about what is best for themselves.

The lockdown saw extraordinary acts of solidarity. Neighbours gathered in the streets to share a socially distanced meal outdoors. The German organisation Ways Out of Loneliness (Wege aus der Einsamkeit e.V.) held online meetings for the over-65s with up to 80 participants experimenting with video conferencing for the first time, participating in fitness classes, listening to lectures, or just chatting. The Oll Inklusiv association, which usually holds daytime “club nights” for older people in Hamburg, organised bingo to techno music. As the pace of life slowed down, many people took more time to call and speak with older friends and relatives.

Growing old in the city

One positive development in recent years has been the increasing number of cities embracing the World Health Organization concept of “age-friendly cities”, launched in 2010. An age-friendly city aims to minimise the discrepancy between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy, taking steps to develop and maintain the ability of its elderly population to live an active life. Membership of the Age-friendly Cities Network does not come with any requirements, but participating cities and municipalities undertake to pay increased attention to the needs of older people. One thousand cities and municipalities across 41 countries are currently represented, including London, New York, Madrid, Tampere, Bern, Brussels, and Dijon. Canada has signed up nationally.

Measures for age-friendly cities, such as barrier-free access, wide and safe pavements, and cycling infrastructure, benefit all ages. Ottawa has repaired damaged pavements, put up more pedestrian traffic lights, and installed 100 new benches. These benches are not just for recreation but aim to increase mobility for the elderly by providing places to rest when out and about. In Akita, Japan, local companies are encouraged to join an age-friendly partner programme to deliver groceries directly to older people unable to shop for themselves. London has organised health walks for older citizens to walk together in the park. In Tampere, citizens’ advice centres in central shopping locations raise awareness of the municipal and private services that are available.

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While Hamburg has not yet joined the network, making the city inclusive for all ages is an important focus for local government. Despite the difficult budgetary situation, the city’s Social Democrat-Green coalition is planning action. The Hamburg Greens’ focus is digital inclusion for the elderly, with measures including barrier-free training sessions designed for accessibility (no unfamiliar words or jargon), a computer lending scheme, and the installation of wifi in care homes.

The age-friendly city provides an orientation for the future of cities: neighbourhoods built around mutual support, with public meeting places; long-term care communities integrated with multigenerational housing; and flexible residential units that can be resized according to demand, giving older people the option to downsize their homes, freeing up larger homes for families.

We’re in this together

The Covid-19 crisis has thrust issues of care, ageing, and loneliness to the fore, sparking a conversation about ageing societies that is often deferred. Europe must be prepared for demographic change. To combat the creeping

generational divide, we must create inclusive spaces and build a society where people of all ages and backgrounds meet and live together.

For generations, life has been divided into three main stages: education, work, and retirement. This model may have had its day. Education and training should be accessible to all ages through lifelong learning. Working arrangements should allow time and space for caring for the young and old. The definition of work should be broadened to include not just gainful employment but also activities such as volunteering, education, and care. For pensions to remain sufficient while being affordable for future generations of taxpayers, working lives may lengthen. But as good health lasts longer and ageing is delayed, many people will want to work for longer. Improving quality of life in old age also implies improved working conditions in certain trades, particularly in professions heavy in manual labour.

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The younger generations also stand to benefit from a reconfigured balance between the three phases of life. The pressure to finish education as quickly as possible in order to start work should be lifted, and working life should provide opportunities for time off.

Mainstream media often present a narrative that pits the old against the young. But is the clash of generations credible? As many young people fight for the climate in movements like Fridays for Future, we older Green activists march alongside them bearing slogans like “Oldies for grandchildren”. For decades, the older generations have fought battles around nuclear power, working conditions, world hunger and inequality, gender justice, and clean air and food. Side by side with our children and grandchildren, we will continue to do so.



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