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**Intergenerational Education for Social Inclusion and Solidarity: The Case Study of the EU Funded Project "Connecting Generations"**

**Abstract:** This paper reflects on lessons learned from a validated model of international collaboration based on research and practice. During the European Year for Active Ageing (2012), a partnership of seven organizations from the European Union (EU) plus Turkey implemented the Lifelong Learning Programme partnership "Connecting Generations" which involved universities, non-governmental organizations, third age Universities and municipalities in collaboration with local communities. Reckoning that Europe has dramatically changed in

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its demographic composition and is facing brand new challenges regarding intergenerational and intercultural solidarity, each partner formulated and tested innovative and creative practices that could enhance better collaboration and mutual understanding between youth and senior citizens, toward a more inclusive Europe for all. Several innovative local practices have been experimented, attentively systematized and peer-validated among the partners. On the basis of a shared theoretical framework coherent with EU and Europe and Training 2020 Strategy, an action-research approach was adopted throughout the project in order to understand common features that have been replicated and scaled up since today.

**Key words:** Intergenerational Relationships Learning, Intergenerational Solidarity, Lifelong Learning

### **Introduction**

It is well discussed in literature that at least three demographic challenges could actually detain Europe 2020 strategy (EC, 2010) from seeing realized its goal (Gros, Roth, 2014) to become a smart, inclusive and sustainable continent. These are mass migrations, population ageing and population decline. These challenges represent different sides of the same polygon: while cultural changes, low fertility, and increasing longevity cause populations to rapidly grow older and decline in absolute numbers, the only reducing, and not fully intentional, measure to stop such a phenomenon over the years has been to sustain migration flows, especially of youth, from neighboring or farther away developing countries.

How can European citizens possibly thrive in a Europe that is feared to be the only continent on Earth whose population will shrink by 2050? Can we think of a sustainable society where young and older adults are so far apart and face conflicting challenges to survive?

According to a study carried by Eurostat in 2015 (Kotzeva, 2015) and 2016 on average, each European woman has 1.58 children in the EU, substantially below the 2.1 children needed to sustain the current population level. Due to low death rates and

high net migration, the overall population in Europe may be increasing, but the median age is crawling slowly upwards: 42 years in 2014 compared to just 29 a decade earlier.

The strains on welfare, pensions, and healthcare systems are easy to imagine but very difficult to prevent or govern, as Europeans live longer than ever before. Young Europeans will have to work harder, even in countries where unemployment rates are fierce and be more efficient and productive in order to pay for the healthcare and pensions of a growing cohort of older Europeans. On the other side, older Europeans may have to put off retirement, working well into their 70s and preventing younger generations to enter the labor market.

While reckoning the importance of the demographic and economic perspective, as education and training experts and activists how are we going to tackle the education needs of a deeply mutated EU population?

The hypothesis of this paper is that, according to the ever-growing societal demand for social inclusion, intergenerational learning, realized in a non-formal education setting and valuing nonformal settings, can contribute to create fertile grounds for dialogue among young and old people and foster new ways to face common challenges, with the shared objective of the well-being of all.

### **The “CONGENIAL: Connecting Generations” Project**

Reckoning such challenges, the project “CONGENIAL: Connecting Generations” was formulated and developed. The results that are presented in this paper show us a way to link three key concepts: lifelong learning, social inclusion, and intergenerational solidarity.

“Connecting Generations” activities were realized during two years long European Learning Partnership funded in 2012 under the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme 2006-2013 (LLP) and specifically within the Grundtvig sub-program dedicated to adult education. LLP no longer exists as we write and has been replaced by Erasmus Plus starting from 2014. The latter was intended to represent a less fragmented approach to education and training, with a higher level of interaction among

the fields of high, vocational, school, and adult education, compared to the past. It is too early to evaluate if such objective was met in three editions (2014, 2015, and 2016) of Erasmus Plus but CONGENIAL expressed and developed LLP principles, and its results are coherent with the overall vision of lifelong and life wide learning.

LLP was indeed a courageous program in putting education and training on the agenda not only of States and experts but also of civil society activists scattered around Europe and with few opportunities to exchange and learn from each other. LLP contributed to creating and developing common spaces of interaction in learning and training throughout Europe. It offered an opportunity to build Europe from grassroots and not make it descend from above, especially from EU institutions in Brussels, often perceived as far and hostile to citizens. LLP made possible that people from different countries and backgrounds meet and work together in piloting innovative actions for change. In particular, learning partnerships were a very “easy and friendly” to use format of learning through practice that was available also to small organizations: partnerships focused mainly on exchange of practices and experiences through mobility (study visits) and did not request too high projecting competencies from submitters, seldom available, as it would be later the case, and the pitfall, with Erasmus Plus.

LLP was established “[...] to contribute through lifelong learning to the development of the Community as an advanced knowledge society, with sustainable economic development, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme\\_it](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme_it)). LLP meant also to ensure the protection of the environment for future generations. The goal of the program was, in particular, to enhance and sustain cooperation and mobility between education and training so that European member states, and Europe as a whole, become a landmark of world quality.

In other words, the Lifelong Learning Programme was designed by policy makers to enable people, at any stage of their life, to take part in stimulating learning experiences, as well as developing education and training across Europe. Citizens could

participate in LLP both as students (of formal and non-formal education), members of associations, professional figures in different fields of education but as well as individual citizens, through their LLP National Agencies.

In the Grundtvig sub-program, dedicated to adult education, the following were considered as priorities. Covering teachers, trainers, staff, and adult learners, among others, the program aimed to:

- Increase the number of people in adult education.
- Improve mobility conditions in adult learning.
- Improve the quality and cooperation between adult education organizations.
- Develop innovative educational and management practices.
- Ensure social inclusion through adult education.
- Support innovative information and communications technology (ICT)-based educational content, services, and practices.

That happened even before the “quasi-concept,” meaning an ideal scenario that still needs more scientific systematization, of “social innovation,” became pervasive in the EU Agenda.<sup>4</sup> In fact, among the reasons why we propose to reflect on this particular project two years after its completion emerges from our belief that it has represented an incubator of social innovation related to active ageing and therefore still has potential impact to play.

The coming to life of the project “Connecting Generations” was in itself a good practice: partners met in Villasimius, Sardinia, Italy in October 2011 during a three days international contact seminar organized by the Italian National Agency and could start a dialogue on needs and resources each one of them could make available for contributing at the EU level to the overall cause of enhancing intergenerational learning and active ageing, in the

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<sup>4</sup> According to the EU Directorate for Social Research, social innovation represents an important field of research for social scholars and humanists, necessary for policy analyzes within both the Union and Member States (EC, 2013a).

framework of the incoming European Year for Active Ageing 2012.

Three key factors were agreed by experts in Villasimius and brought to adult education activists' attention: (1) senior citizens should fully participate in community life and be socially and culturally engaged. Adult learning is a key asset in this framework and a precious space of experimentation; (2) they should feel more fulfilled at work, for those who are still working with full or part time responsibilities; and (3) they should be put in proper conditions to be more independent in everyday life, with specific supports regarding a resilience mechanism at the individual, community and service level.

Partners decided that "Connecting Generations" project should focus mainly on the first of the three challenges and identified in non-formal adult education an opportunity to build not only new knowledge but also the social capital of older peoples. Learning should not happen in a private and sectorial matter, though: the real feature of the project to start was the cultivation of relations and networks between different generations and cultures. "Connecting Generations" model was meant to produce a toolkit of educative instruments to ensure opportunities for participation, creative thinking and in general active citizenship for the well-being of all EU citizens, intended as the style of life that enables happiness and the permanency of cultural and environmental diversity and, far from the quest for opulence or dis-human economic growth is based on harmony, equality, equity, and solidarity.

With a duration of 24 months and the participation of 9 organizations from 7 different European countries plus Turkey, namely Greece, Italy, Poland, United Kingdom, Romania, Slovenia, and Hungary. The project began in August 2012, disposed of a budget of about a hundred and eighty thousand Euro and ended in August 2014. The maximum available budget to each partner was 24 thousand Euro making it quite easy to handle even for smaller organizations.

The problem that the project intended to tackle can be described as follows. Different generations, grandparents, parents, and young people or children were at risk of isolation, speaking

different languages, not understanding each other, and living different lives whatsoever. We were witnessing an inextricable puzzle of diversity and distances that could lead to the invisibility of older peoples. As EU citizens and education and training activists, based on our experience and that of others like us, we needed to take an informed action to avoid inequality of opportunities that hinder the right of each person to exert full citizenship. Our challenges were to co-construct a citizens' knowledge society, with no distinction whatsoever based on age or sex or cultural provenience. That should come from a genuine communication among generations based on mutual curiosity and respect, in a living values atmosphere. The overall, long-term, result we were seeking was to contribute to a better quality of life for all generations. The particular tool available was a rich portfolio of adult education initiatives already carried out or ready to be experimented by partners.

The goal of the project was to create in our local communities an enhancing environment conducive to intergenerational communication and mutual understanding that should lead to a better quality of life for all, through non-formal and informal adult education activities carried out by the partner organizations, as well as to produce and transfer knowledge, methods and good practice for senior citizen education and intergenerational learning through mobility and a shared online platform at European level which also includes Turkey.

The specific objectives of the project were:

1. To develop innovative methods to foster communication and create learning opportunities between older and younger generations based on exchanging good practices of the participant organizations.
2. To realize at least 120 mobility between seven European countries and Turkey to learn from each other and develop together good practices in intergenerational pedagogy.

The approach had four main aspects:

- Experimenting innovative, non-conventional forms of communication and learning to enhance mutual understanding and recognition between generations (e.g.,

- world cafes, learning circles, e-mentoring, learning through arts especially music and dance, and paideia).
- Offering learning opportunities, based on participation and creativity to be shared and utilized by the old and the young, preserving and sharing cultural memories (e.g., traditional games, folk art, and art crafts) as well as opening to the digital era (social media, ICTs in general).
  - Exchange good practices through mobility, a web platform, and international seminars.
  - Systematize all the above in a user-friendly e-publication, based on a scientific method.

### **A Framework for the Project: New Needs and Challenges for Adult Education in Europe**

Once recognized the need to pave new roads of intergenerational learning, there is a growing space for research and experimentation that will have positive feedback also on social inclusion and the valuing of cross-national, and cross-generational dimensions.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002), active ageing can be defined as the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in a framework of quality of life as people age. Older people who retire from work, ill or live with disabilities should not be seen as a burden in ever more consumer society where people are valued only under materialistic terms: on the contrary, they should be recognized as active contributors to their families and communities. They are a key entity in shaping multiple identities, in continuous negotiation with younger generations, and transmit and modify cultural heritage.

Validated policies and practices of active ageing put people in the conditions to realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the life course and to participate in society. The word “active” in fact refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual, and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labor force. Interdependence, intergenerational solidarity, as

permanent learning that should be enhanced, not interrupted in the last age of life, are essential tenets of active ageing.

The Member States offers a framework for the implementation of policies in Europe that are functional to a smart, sustainable, and inclusive society (EC, 2010). Out of ten guidelines contained in the integrated document, the first six are devoted to economy, while the last four focus on employment and in particular guideline number 8 refers explicitly to lifelong learning: “Developing a skilled workforce responding to labor market needs, promoting job quality and lifelong learning “and number 9 stresses the importance of improving the systems of education, training, and education:” improving the performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing time participation in tertiary education”<sup>5</sup> (EC, 2010, pp. 21-22).

It is not, as we know, a new position: Europe for several years has emphasized the need for high-quality education and training to provide high-quality skills responding to the changing requirements of the labor market. In most contexts and through various financing measures Europe strived to demonstrate how a system of adequate and reliable services is crucial. Indeed it is the basis to generate a smart, sustainable, and inclusive Europe. It is not just a matter of educating and training the staff needed for research, development, and innovation, and therefore provide a productive and flexible labor force: it also means working on policies to face the impact of an ageing population in the workforce, decreasing the so-called “transmission of poverty” from one generation to the next. In fact, low-income families tend to invest less in education and training, and without adequate policies, there would be no enhancement of non-formal and informal dimension of learning or other know-how.

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<sup>5</sup> The main objective of the EU, according to which the Member States must define their national targets, is to reduce the dropout rate of 10%, while increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40% in 2020 (EC, 2010).

In order to boost growth and jobs, to avoid the mismatch<sup>6</sup> between training and work, not only education and training systems must offer quality and accompany people to acquire the skills that pave the way for a transition to the labor market, but we also need measures and adequate tools to a more effective and more active management of competences: competencies that we already have—how to recognize and exploit them—or those that are missing—with particular reference to core competencies—and those to be built anew, with particular reference to key competencies, often acquired in the daily life context.

Research results released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that adult skills in countries that participated in the survey, and their use and impact, are at such a low level that enhancement of social capital is severely limited. Unlike the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures cognitive skills of fifteen years old, the results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) investigate educational policies in the labor market, in welfare systems, in the quality of work in enterprises, in economic policy choices. The research highlighted the ability to manage information and solve problems in technologically rich environments, in particular, capacity to access, evaluate, analyze, communicate and use

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<sup>6</sup> As we read, for example, in the Programme for Italy “Youth Guarantee” 2014-2020, published in February 2014 (p. 19): “To curb the chances of employment of young Italians is not only the lack of labor demand triggered by the economic crisis, but also a growing gap between the skills required by businesses and those possessed by young people entering the labor market. The so-called “skills mismatch” takes on different forms, determined by several factors (labor force too or too little trained, the mismatch between training and production technologies). A bad ‘match’ between demand and supply of labor leads to cumulative effects in the long run: working incongruously with their skills.” The mismatch between skills acquired and activity also happens among the employed ones: many do not do the jobs for which they are prepared and would be ready to work. In Italy, we face a paradox. There is an unanswered demand for labor and young people looking for a job (European Commission, 2013b).

information through the use of tools and digital applications: all the latter are called Foundation Skills and are considered to represent the cognitive pillar to live and work in the third millennium. An individual with low-level performance in these competencies faces high chances of exclusion from the workplace and in society.

Those studies show the relevance of the problem and support the urgent need for interventions. Surely, attention to learning throughout the course of life requires, beyond the recognition of its intrinsic value, the identification and implementation of new measures and new ways of working in line with a sound framework of theoretical and methodological reference. Its meaning, in fact, goes well beyond contingency planning and identification of intervention measures and financial constraints.

Generally, the correlation with systems of Education and Training was considered functional to production and increase of income, founded precisely on the available capital in terms of knowledge (Becker, 1964). The ratio of investment in education and increased productivity was already highlighted in the 1960s: “More education should contribute to growth in two different ways. First, it should enhance the quality of the workforce [...] this should generate an increase in work productivity [...] Second, a higher cultural level of the population is expected to accelerate the rate of accumulation of the stock of knowledge in society” (Denison, 1966, p. 215). Human capital, according to this approach, differs from other resource stocks only for its structural incorporation in the individual. It is, however, of stock by its nature subject to depreciation and obsolescence and variable returns, in need of a continuous process of updating and adaptation with respect to the advancement of knowledge, with complementary activities and parallel paths of education.

If knowledge guides the production, it is the wheel of development (economic and other) and knowledge is a factor of wealth and well-being, we face a paradox: knowledge itself is reduced to a “good” that is consumed quickly, and as quickly, in fact, it becomes obsolete. At the same time, we start valuing and assessing the “quality” of knowledge in which to invest: many

kinds of knowledge cannot be recognized in their value, but they can still express a potential to be exploited. In the knowledge and information society, culture and education risk progressively becoming market products, following the rules of any other product. Moreover, knowledge is valuable to the extent that it is able to serve the production process and lead to income: knowledge thus appears as capital to invest not as “human capital,” but as functional to productive development. Therefore, the so-called “intangible economy,” invests in education, training, vocational training, immigration policies, improving the health of workers and other intangible factors that increase the productivity of labor. It seems to be an imperative to try to capitalize on the human capital of which a certain country can dispose of. The risk is to assess human beings in terms of cost or benefit, damage or benefits, and losses or gains, denying the value of the concept of human capital in its entirety.

If human capital is defined as a multidimensional and unobservable construct created by investments in education, training, health, family and socioeconomic background, such as to cause an effect on productivity, observable from labor income, the evaluation of the system of knowledge of the subject has to be measured by a multi-parameter setting within which correlation with the production performance nevertheless remains central.

However, the concept of human capital in recent years drew attention to the economy of training as part of a debate increasingly connected to the development of society: it is now increasingly related to the concepts of sustainable and endogenous development and social cohesion. The constructs “human capital” and “human development” in recent years seem to share similar paths of revision and extension of their meanings. The Human Development Index is a key step in this path with the fundamental importance given to education and literacy processes, but two other documents are certainly significant.

In 2009, the so-called Stiglitz Commission Report was published under the title of Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. In the Report, edited by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi (2009), they highlight the indispensable need to identify indicators to

measure the quality of life, sustainable development, and the relationship with the environment. The report, rather than concentrating on production, focuses on indicators to measure the well-being “from the people's side” by identifying seven dimensions that are fundamental: the psychophysical state, knowledge, and ability to understand the world in which you live, the environment, interpersonal relationships and participation in society. To these we add two cross-cutting dimensions: equity, regarded as the balance between the intra-generational relationships and sustainability, understood in terms of the balance between the generations. We refer to a fair and sustainable well-being for which not only quantitative but also qualitative variables of the human condition are crucial.

The intergenerational perspective becomes, therefore, not only a necessity for social inclusion but also a potential indicator of well-being and sustainable development. Moreover, the knowledge that seems to be characteristic of a past generation and therefore considered obsolete (both regarding production and social relations) may be regarded as an expression of human potential.

Speaking of intergenerational balance obviously, entangles economic factors related to a relationship between “productive generations” at work and “generations” who are enjoying retirement. The boundaries between these phases, with the transformation of the labor market that we are currently experiencing, however, are very unstable and fluid. The distinction is no longer clear, if not, in some cases, paradoxically reversed. We encounter in fact more and more situations in which generations of aged parents no longer in the labor market represent an actual economic support for the young generation in an employment crisis. In addition, there are also demographic considerations with respect to an ageing population.

The phrase “the future is in the hands of young people” would seem no longer true if the majority of the population, at least in the Western world, is not so young anymore: without sharing of knowledge necessary to build a sustainable future, without a new “platform” shared between generations, there is nowadays no more future whatsoever.

All this requires a reconsideration of the meaning of intergenerational dialogue and effectively valuing the necessary collaboration and intergenerational continuity. It is increasingly evident that traditional and neat classification of the phases of life, social roles and production is losing ground. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, this is now happening in daily life: it is a phenomenon that needs to be understood and managed, that also requires the construction of new knowledge to give meaning and depth to a generational continuity that takes on new value in terms of social ties and in terms of intergenerational solidarity. The solution seems to be horizontal collaboration and solidarity becomes a mutual need.

In a lifelong learning perspective, a new need for competencies to manage the continuity and attribute meanings emerges. Indeed, it appears to be essential to reflect on generational transfer of meanings not only in diachronic but synchronic manners. The need for a dialogical perspective in which knowledge can be shared and placed in continuity with a future under construction appears evident.

When we think of intergenerational dialogue, we often recall the term “transmission.” The etymology of the term, from the Latin *transmittere*, *in fact*, refers to the sense of the “switch” from one person to another, from one place to another, from one time to another, from one generation to another. It suggests the idea of “pass the baton,” and it brings to mind the metaphor of relay: a role game in which one enters consciously in the race to bring forward the result reached by the other and no one runs much and only for himself, but toward a “team objective.” No one can stop the run. It is not a possibility. Who passes, does not “drop” the baton, but he “deliveries” to another person certain that he who receives shares the same rules of the game, recognizes the value of the sign, as well as the duty to continue on.

So, in the action of transmitting, both the one who passes and the recipient have an active role and share meanings. If we return to the metaphor of passing the baton in a social context, however, we can grasp the need to consider also the need to negotiate and re-interpret meanings in the transition, which necessarily become related to the perspective of which they are

interpreted. Moreover, in light of the above considerations, we understand the “race” can even involve those who had already abandoned but are needed the field again.

From the educational point of view, the node appears to be attributable to the “how to” share “meanings,” often between past and present, and between the present and the past. Surely educational practices using memories can be reviewed and enhanced. Memory should definitely be preserved, but at the same time, it can be considered as a useful seed to produce future. This is to define the meaning of a “memory” that does not crystallize the memory itself but gives shape to negotiated meanings, in the present, for the future.

“Memory” is indeed a term that we meet more and more often, sometimes abused and almost exploited in a society that often makes fashion of it: the fashion of the past is often a clumsy expression of a widespread fear of loss of roots, it seems an anchor to answer an apparent collective amnesia that disorients us on who we really are, but that is likely to stiffen the idea of identity, making it static, shut, closed in on itself. Zygmunt Bauman (2010) talks about “roots” and “anchors” in identity and socialization processes, “while the roots torn from the ground where they grew will probably will dry up and die, anchors are pulled out only to be thrown somewhere else, and can be thrown with the same ease in many different ports, at very long distances” (Bauman, 2010, p.19). According to Bauman’s metaphor while roots may not grow another type of plant, anchors facilitate the temporary docking of a vessel to a pier, and for this reason, do not affect the quality or capacity of the ship. Memory, as a possible object of an intergenerational dialogue, should probably be more about knowing we have an anchor rather than finding our own roots. Especially if we should take into account more and more of a “web of continuity and discontinuity in history and a growing number of contemporary identities” (Bauman, 2010, p. 20) and parallel that “almost no affiliation can comprise the “whole self,” because every person is involved, not only in the course of their lives but at any time of life, in multiple memberships” (Bauman, 2010, p. 20).

There will probably be less and less social knowledge connotations dependent on generations. We will have to re-consider and re-negotiate knowledge that, by osmosis, becomes part of the training of each subject and creates continuity: informal knowledge, stemming from everyday life, can definitely be a basis for dialogue, a starting point. Such knowledge can, better than others, be immediately perceived as significant as with it is developed and socially built to respond to the problems of everyday life. This knowledge threatens to appear less meaningful, less decisive, more interpretable, and therefore not communicable and negotiable in the present so different from the past.

The prevalence of the formal dimension of learning, with its equipment and technological support, has over time led to the lack of consideration, if not to the devaluation, of informal knowledge that the subject constructs and processes within the context of his own life. Through memory we preserve the memory of our training process, usually unconsciously: knowledge linked to the interpretation and transformation of the environment, to the experience of reality through the individual experience, collectively shared. Duccio Demetrio (2002) defines memory as a “network of narratives that we defend and that we have defended, showing us that we had a story, we had a plot.” Nevertheless, this story and this plot necessarily refer to the sense of identity and belonging that develops in sharing knowledge and expertise, not only to recognize and be recognized, but also to build new knowledge.

The enhancement of this heritage, therefore, needs to be based on the involvement of the generations and it cannot be delegated or assigned only to the school system. Non-formal education of adults and community education can instead play an essential role that must be recognized and supported.

### **The Main Results of the CONGENIAL action-research**

The CONGENIAL project was developed through local initiatives with an explicit educational objective: aimed at promoting lifelong learning for young and older people in shared spaces, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background. It also worked for the social inclusion of older people through recognition of their

knowledge and produced a renewed effort to strengthen an intergenerational link with young people. This objective was shared at the international partnership level, where analysis and reflection on the ongoing experiences and practices were pillars for cooperation between different organizations (Lave, Wenger, 1991).

Educational activities of CONGENIAL were the object of a qualitative research made by the partner organizations,<sup>7</sup> to make explicit the complexity of the contexts in which they operated, to trace the peculiarities of educational actions and define their characters of methodological innovation, in terms of a transformative educational action (Mezirow, Taylor, 2009).

The key theoretical assumption of this qualitative study is that the fundamental way of knowledge building is essentially linked to the direct experience of the subjects, and most of the learning comes from practice (Dewey, 1933). Human beings face similar situations and try to select the solutions and procedures that proved more effective in the past and adapt them to the new task to perform.

One must also consider that often learning is distinguished by its experimental character and a significant part of tacit knowledge, and therefore, greater awareness of action can be produced by introducing reflective and comparative moments on experiences. Reflexivity (Schon, 1983; Lipman, 1991) is based on the repertoire of cases and experiences of the past that allow to act on assumptions and to move into problematic situations, identifying possible solutions while comparison relates to the production of knowledge through the detection of similarities and differences between those situations that are under the lens.

Both of these processes allow reaching a higher level of knowledge (Mortari, 2009; Fabbri, Striano, Malacarne, 2008), thanks to:

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<sup>7</sup> This project action has been implemented by Edaforum in collaboration with the Department of Science of Education and Psychology, University of Florence.

- The comparison between different points of view that allows the transition from the subjective dimension to inter-subjective validation of acquired knowledge.
- The overcoming of the false idea that is possible to formulate general laws and theories that can be applied in every context.
- The recognition that transfer of knowledge is not always possible because what we know is the result of a unique understanding of a specific situation.

Despite this, a certain degree of replicability and scalability is possible in understanding actions undertaken in different contexts and their fundamental characteristics that can make interventions recognizable outside and comparable with similar experiences. So, the analysis of practices that a specific professional community realizes, as in the case of Connecting Generation, intends to find their own features and identify common elements that can revise the theoretical and/or methodological models of reference: from a significant number of experiences that have been valued a sort of meta-model positively can emerge, as a basis for the definition of “good practices.”

The research methodology included direct involvement of all operators, who provided data and evidence for their validation. During international meetings, the various educational experiences have been the subject of a common analysis and reflection. Operators also created thematic focus groups, on memory, participation, arts, traditional knowledge just to mention a few, and collected and analyzed research data.

The research began with collection and analysis of existing educational experiences that promote intergenerational dialogue, with the aim of identifying some useful criteria to assess and compare the interventions of adult education carried out by the project partners.

Thanks to this set of criteria identified in similar activities and interventions, research has developed a comparative analysis of the educational activities carried out by educators, teachers, or operators in the local communities where the organizations

operate.<sup>8</sup> They share the same initial problem—the dialogue between generations—within the same area of intervention—adult education—to reach a common objective, as the development of a shared methodology.

The following phase of the investigation was data collection on educational activities and practices carried out by partners' organizations (the analysis also took place through focus groups with local operators) and on joint activities of the international partnership (analysis of the records and reports of international meetings), then moved on to decoding of the above according to the method of "content analysis" (Semeraro, 2011).

This involved the identification of analytical units, and then the decoding of the aggregations of data according to two criteria: the first described the activities in specific operational contexts; the second one detected the relationship between the key elements that characterize the activity under investigation. The results of this process have been assessed and validated, together with those

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<sup>8</sup> Educators, teachers, and operators involved in educational activities have carried out the compilation of the form through a group effort that involves three basic steps: the description of the activity, the analysis of some of its features, the interpretation/reflection on the elements that define the activity itself. The activity description is primarily to provide some qualitative data to narrow the experience (e.g., title, objectives, target, and duration); the analysis phase focuses on three main elements: the learning needs of participants, networks enabled by the implementation of activities, the educational methodology adopted. In particular, the training needs are identified with the analysis of the context at two levels: the demographic changes in European society, the youth issue and other social challenges that Europe is facing; the specificity that these changes acquire in different countries involved in the project. In the third and last step of reflection on educational practices implemented, operators have reinterpreted activities from some key concepts to highlight their intergenerational and innovation elements, to check the consistency of the results achieved with objectives proposed, to define the learning of the operators in the specific educational sector. The results of data analysis have been validated in a participatory way through local and international focus groups that have involved representatives and members of all the partner organizations.

of the project, with the focus groups with all international partners in the last project meeting in Poland.

In this action-research, the construct of “educational practice” is central, coherently with complex actions that want to achieve an educational purpose, or, in other words, an activity consists of actions and choices intentionally made to achieve one or more learning objectives. The key feature of educational practice, compared to other types of practices, is the special relationship between the educator, or educators, and learner, or learners.

To read and deconstruct a practice, it is important to make explicit its constituent elements, to bring out less visible dynamics, to be able to report the empirical evidence, in short, to provide feedback from data collected in the field in order to guide the process of understanding and interpretation (Laneve 2005; Roig Vila, Laneve, 2011).

According to an integrated logic, the analysis of the CONGENIAL educational practices was carried out to know complex dynamics of education: how educators act in certain contexts, and to achieve certain goals. Central was also the meanings attributed to the actions realized, hopes and expectations that animated them, all tacit knowledge involved.

Therefore, quality research on educational practices for intergenerational dialogue has allowed us to identify and circulate results, innovative products, and processes, and especially good practices successfully tested that can be a model to follow, which integrate professional skills and knowledge with the best available empirical evidence to support the learning processes. Given the characteristics of CONGENIAL partner organizations, the contexts where they operate, and the heterogeneity of the activities carried out, the possibility of generalization and transfer will not involve “whole practices,” but rather some of their segments, which however may stimulate discussion with other stakeholders who face similar challenges.

This can be seen as the main contribution that “Connecting Generations” has given to the development of the European system of lifelong learning, in terms of strengthening the knowledge and skills of the professionals involved in adult

education (Demetrio, 2002) and in particular in the framework of active ageing and intergenerational solidarity (Baschiera, Deluigi, Lupi, 2014).

The attention paid to the participatory processes in education activities, in the broader work with the local communities for the construction of networks, including the activities of the international partnership, has allowed us to spread the knowledge gained at all levels of the system implemented by “Connecting Generations”: dialogue, discussion and the enhancement of experience—life, business, personal and collective, and more—have strengthened the link between specific educational action and their social impact in local communities, as well as a better understanding of new and possible forms of cooperation and solidarity between generations (Hansen, Molpeceres, Rothuizen, 2012).

We, therefore, present the main results of the analysis, comparison, and evaluation of intergenerational education practices, realized by each organization involved and shared within the international partnership. It is possible to have a shared description of intergenerational education, declined in its basic elements and that highlights some methodological and operational criteria.

The first element emerging from the participatory analysis of the realized practices regards the types of needs to which intergenerational education responds. Mainly, they are social, educational and community needs. In particular, with the first group, we refer to phenomena of social and generational isolation that affect young and old, especially dropouts, unemployed, socially excluded, and computer illiterate. Hence the need to strengthen knowledge and skills of learners, through lifelong learning opportunities that foster dialogue, exchange, and daily interaction between people of different ages, sexes, and ethnic origins.

From the point of view of educational needs, this type of intervention can be used to introduce elements of nonformal education and divergent thinking in formal education, especially for youth with learning and adaptation difficulties to the school system. At the same time, this education meets specific training

needs such as knowledge of a foreign language or ICT, particularly for the older generation, or for the acquisition of soft skills such as the ability to, for example, cooperate and collaborate and problem-solving. On the other hand, a second need is a knowledge need of educators that work in the formal, non-formal and informal sectors on methods and techniques of intergenerational education, including those on innovative technologies. The third type of need, those of communities, refers to the loss of cultural identity, such as local knowledge and expertise, which puts at risk the indispensable resources for the endogenous development of the territories, and to the need of mutual understanding, active citizenship, and solidarity to build fairer and more cohesive societies.

Directly connected with these types of needs, the intergenerational educational objectives pursued by CONGENIAL activities highlight their strong social and cultural mark. A vision of learning as a means of social and community cohesion emerges, rather than being geared exclusively to individual development. Supporting dialogue and mutual understanding between generations, this education contributes to fighting social, cultural and technological isolation and marginalization, and at the same time to enhance the traditional knowledge of older generations in training of young people, recalling and sharing memories, values, cultural and local heritage in order to improve the quality of life in the local community.

On the side of the research, one of the objectives of intergenerational education is to experience innovative practices, educational methods, and activities of intergenerational learning in formal, non-formal and informal education.

Moving on from the descriptive level of intergenerational education activities to more interpretative one about data collected during the research, we can develop three reflection axes.

The first one focuses on the main methodological and operational elements that create solidarity between generations. Beyond the different educational methods used to build bridges between generations, the analysis shows that some criteria used to define a methodological framework can extend to all activities carried out and bring them back to a common framework.

A key element is the required reading and interpretation of social and educational needs of participants, but also their expectations. The purpose of this initial activity is to create favorable conditions to pursue effective actions, to build cohesive work groups, to propose topics that affect all participants, capturing their attention and their motivation.

Another element concerns the reciprocity of learning and the enhancement of generational knowledge. The older adults are the custodians of traditional knowledge and trades that are disappearing and losing their value, in particular among the younger generation. Their collaboration in educational activities aimed at youth can spread this knowledge and traditions, avoiding its loss. Likewise, the young (the so-called Millennials) are able to offer in exchange their knowledge on non-traditional communication means linked to the digital world. This aspect leads to another element that characterizes intergenerational learning, as it was interpreted by the CONGENIAL: *it is the importance of "working together," as a formative moment based on practical testing of knowledge and on individual learning strongly linked to experiences of intergenerational dialogue.*

The second axis concerns the most innovative elements of intergenerational education and detected by the analysis of experiences carried out, that is explained below:

- The dialogue between tradition and innovation using the knowledge and skills of old and young people. If young people were able to appreciate the value of knowledge and stories of old adults, this latter themselves had come to realize how important they are, even in the digital age, the maintenance of traditions and building bridges to transmit knowledge, memories, and experiences that would otherwise be lost.
- The contribution of informal knowledge to formal education. Intergenerational education can make study experiences more real, fun and exciting for those students who have more difficulties in adapting to the system and learning at school, because it responds to basic needs, with a simple and understandable language, it puts everyone in a position of

ease and avoids the hierarchy among “good” and “bad” students.

- The promotion of not only intergenerational learning, but also intercultural openness. Contemporary society does not always allow young people to have easy access to their grandparents or older people in general, and the stories of the past that they carry. This is particularly the case for young people who are in a foreign country and have lost contact with older people who remained at home, as well as having too superficial relationships with their parents, as they often work all day.
- Changing people and context relationships through education has effects on the community well-being and the quality of life. To allow everyone to voice their opinions, thoughts, and ideas enhance the participation of cross-cutting stakeholders of the local community (children, parents, families, the older adult, and community leaders) in decisions and projects that relate to the community itself.
- The investment in developing and strengthening skills for active democratic participation. In addition to the rediscovery of the values and local history, this educational work aims to improve “public agora,” thanks to the use of methods that favor the establishment of non-hierarchical and horizontal relationships among participants.

These elements decline intergenerational education according to criteria that guide the actions of education and training, in addition to those that characterize the role of the trainer in this type of activity. “CONGENIAL” Intergenerational Trainer facilitate the intergenerational exchange process, which concerns peer-to-peer educational where participants learn knowledge and/or expertise held by others, creating a good reciprocity movement between the parties involved. He or she is competent enough to conduct sincere and deep discussions with the group of participants, so that they can experience active and mutual listening, for the inclusion of different points of view and identification of shared solutions.

Such intergenerational trainer also aims to achieve the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices that separate

generations in order to increase mutual respect and recognition. It is in this virtuous and fruitful exchange that “Connecting Generations” became more successful: it fostered self-esteem of young and older participants, as the protagonists of the activities, but also built on the experience and competences of their training and professional educators who have participated in international study visits carried out by their organizations.

In conclusion, intergenerational education experienced within CONGENIAL revolves around two key concepts: the first is that caring for others is an educational key, which is the basis of human experience and allows the establishment of adult identity (Galeotti, 2015). Caring in education involves shared objectives from which to think about social and individual bonds. The other key concept is reciprocity that characterizes intergenerational learning, which is a fundamental process of alliance, networking, meeting, and exchange of knowledge among citizens of different ages. In fact, they may experience inclusive paths through the construction of educational relationships that animate the participation and cooperation of the various segments of the society.

The Table 1 shows how research results are linked with the CONGENIAL project objectives and LLP topics.

**Table 1 Relations Between the CONGENIAL Project Objectives and LLP Topics**

<b>LLL Program and Grundtvig Action topics</b>	<b>CONGENIAL project objectives</b>	<b>CONGENIAL results</b>
Education and training of experts and civil society activists Develop innovative educational and management practices.	a) Experimenting innovative, non-conventional forms of communication and learning to enhance mutual understanding and recognition between generations (e.g., world cafes, paideia, learning circles, e-mentoring, learning through arts	CONGENIAL Intergenerational Trainer <i>facilitates</i> an intergenerational exchange process, which fostered acquisition by some participants of knowledge and expertise held by others, creating a good reciprocity movement between the parties

	especially music and dance);	involved. CONGENIAL Intergenerational Trainer is competent to conduct sincere and deep discussions with the group of participants, so that they can experience active and mutual listening, for the inclusion of different points of view and identification of shared solutions.
Development of the Community as an advanced knowledge society, with sustainable economic development, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion through lifelong learning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure social inclusion through adult education.</li> <li>• Increase the number of people in adult education.</li> <li>• Ensure social inclusion through adult education.</li> </ul>	b) Offering learning opportunities, based on participation and creativity to be shared and utilized by the older and the younger, preserving and sharing cultural memories as well as opening to ICTs.	Changing people and local context through education impacts on community well-being and the quality of life.  Create or sustain welcoming spaces for dialogue between tradition and innovation.  The focus shifts from only intergenerational learning, to also intercultural openness.
To promote interaction within the Community, cooperation, and mobility between education and training. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve mobility conditions in adult learning.</li> <li>• Improve the quality and cooperation between adult education organizations.</li> <li>• Support innovative information and communications technology (ICT)-based</li> </ul>	c) Exchange good practices, through mobility, a web platform, and international seminars.	Developing and strengthening skills and attitudes for active democratic participation and communication at different level of local society (e.g., schools, Third Age centers, associations)  Testing the contribution of informal knowledge and ICT to transformative Education and Training.

educational content, services, and practices.		
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*Source:* Own elaboration.

### **Drawing Lessons Learned: Towards a Common Lexicon**

As a conclusion, we report a product as stemming from a collective and extended dialogue among all nine partners of “Connecting Generations” Learning Partnership which developed throughout the project implementation, from the kick-off meeting held in Budapest in November 2012, to the final meeting at the University of Third Age in Bialystok at the end of May 2014.

Since the beginning of the project, as mentioned before, in fact, a reflective approach to learning and therefore to project implementation was put in place, which is not always so common in Grundtvig Learning Partnerships where attention is more on international mobility rather than on producing intellectual output. We intended as “reflective practice” what Donald Schon (1983) introduced at the beginning of the 1980s as “the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in the process of continuous learning.”

Traditionally, with few exceptions, learning partnerships during the Lifelong Learning Programme 2006-2013 focused more on the exchange of experiences and building of human capital and social relations, during international mobility, rather than to the experimentation and systematization of the transformative dimension of learning or the production of outputs. The later were tackled by multilateral projects, directly financed by the Executive Agency Education, Audio-visual and Culture (EACEA) and comprising of more sophisticated partnership, often including universities and research centers, and disposing of more significant funding.

In fact, the purpose of collecting lessons learned is to bring together all, or the majority of, insights gained during implementation that can be usefully applied to future projects. Lessons learned can make a great difference for future projects and help practitioners to make them succeed as well as strengthen their competencies. However logical that might sound, it is not always the case in projects: first, lessons learned must be audited

and documented correctly, without fear of recording also the weakest parts of the project life. Learning comes from failures as well as success, even more from the first than the second. The key verb and action are, for sure, “to reflect” on them. Often, we do not allow ourselves to experience deep reflection as much as it would be necessary, because we are too busy getting to the next task, or completing a report in time for the next deadline.

In finding our common lessons learned we chose the method of “generative word,” borrowed from the Freirean approach (Freire, 1970) to adult literacy education, which bases the content of language lessons on learners' cultural and personal experiences. Instead of using generative words to learn how to read and write, as in the original Freirean mission, we used them to deconstruct and reconstruct key concepts that have been strategic in our work, trying to understand them from multiple cultural perspectives. Paraphrasing the “learner centered approach” we tried to mainstream a “practitioner peer-evaluation approach.”

The objectives of the common exercise were the following:

- Identify keywords that had characterized our project, be they specific per country or in common, i.e., with an EU dimension.
- Draw lessons learned in terms of strengths and weaknesses of the selected approaches.
- Deepen our mutual understanding of key words and concepts, which had emerged from our work.

As an introduction, we went through the very story of the project implementation, in order to co-construct together a common “lived experience.” We identified in circle common keywords of the project. These are action research; active listening and empathy; ageing community and collective dimension; creativity; crisis; the EU dimension; innovation; local and global; network; participation; sharing; and solidarity. Table 2 shows the shared definitions in alphabetic order. It was not an exercise to develop a glossary, but it represents more of a shared vision of key points.

**Table 2 Shared Definitions**

<b>Action research</b>	There is a growing need for research in Europe, in order to understand ongoing changes and be better prepared to face them, as citizens as well as practitioners. Unfortunately, research is too often realm for “experts” that produce long and difficult to comprehend reports that end up in some drawers. Action research is an approach to co-construction of knowledge that is people-centered. Action research must be qualitative and quantitative and put citizens in the condition to understand what is happening in EU societies at large, and in their own territories. Action research works through dialogue between disciplines and privileged witnesses that are the real protagonist of change.
<b>Active listening and empathy</b>	No good communication can happen without listening and in the absence of empathy. In the era of social media and “social shouting,” listening is a revolutionary tool for intergenerational and intercultural understanding. During the project activities, children, youth, and the older adults have been motivated to listen to each other, without prejudice and pre-concepts. Listening carefully opens windows and doors
<b>Ageing</b>	The demographic phenomenon of ageing Europe is a fact, demonstrated by hard data and evidence. We can see ageing population from two different perspectives. On one side, we see individual older adults that are every day lonelier and disconnected from the community and in need of societal help and specific welfare policies. However, there is also an issue of empowerment at stake. In countries such as Italy, political and economic power is held by the older generation which is not helping, generally speaking, the youth to find their place in society. Young people, as demonstrated in some interviews conducted in La Spezia, one of the Italian cities involved in the project, do not see a bright future in terms of social mobility, while older adults do not feel respected by the youth. This is connected with a lack of mutual knowledge and recognition, as a result of absent generative

	communication.
<b>Community and collective dimension</b>	<p>If we could go back to a time machine to fifty years ago, we would find a very different Europe. Although still scattered by the consequences of Second World War and the Cold War, we would find more cohesive communities, built on non-monetary bounds and fed by a sense of mutual trust and solidarity. The rise of consumerism has coincided with mounting individualism, which is at the opposite end of the continuum with the community and collective resilience strategies. Older people and youth are lonelier than in the past: youth have found an alternative, virtual, a community on social networks while older population can scarcely count on their families and peers. The ongoing crisis put belonging to and striving for a community under the light again: a community of people who can identify alternative solutions to economic scarcity in, for instance, a social and solidarity economic based on people's resilience and respect for Mother Earth.</p>
<b>Creativity</b>	<p>Traditional education and training have amply demonstrated its limits both in formal and non-formal education. Especially schools and universities are tailored to the needs of an Industrial Society that no longer exists as in the past century. Creativity and creative people are able to create values and are the real pioneer of social and educational innovation. Creativity was a key word in “Connecting Generations,” and it represented a successful solution: where traditional means failed, teachers, educators, facilitators, and volunteers looked for alternative ways that put values on dialogue and collective action.</p>
<b>Crisis</b>	<p>If we could “google” everyday chat in markets, workplaces, or bars since 2008, it would be very likely that the word “crisis” would be among the ten most pronounced words. As French philosopher Serres (Serres, 2003) clearly elaborated the ongoing social, economic, and ecological crisis can be compared to the crisis of a seriously ill person: it is a transitory phase which cannot but transform itself and the bearer: either he dies or overcome the illness and “change.” That is a</p>

	<p>similar situation for the world society: we are deeply sick (do we need more evidence than climate change, ISIS and the bleeding of African youth toward the North, just to mention a few?) and we should either extinguish or change. In Chinese ideograms crisis, as often recalled, is the results of two items: risks and opportunities. We should take our risks and welcome crisis as an opportunity for transformation.</p>
<p><b>The EU dimension</b></p>	<p>EU should be built from grassroots, via the experience of its citizens who envision a common project. It should not only be a paragraph in EU project formats but a vision of a multicultural, multi-age, and diverse society that values differences, instead of shunning them. One of the most felt impacts of “Connecting Generations” was, in fact, strengthening EU citizenship: through mobility, we could appreciate and experience the hospitality and genuine, positive, curiosity for cultures diverse from ours. The project also consolidated some EU promoted key competencies: speaking foreign languages, cultural awareness, social competencies, and entrepreneurship.</p>
<p><b>Innovation</b></p>	<p>It means not only doing or creating something new but also performing new tasks with new attitudes and applying new competencies. We focus on social and educational innovation in particular. According to the EU, social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means—new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act. Social innovations take place across boundaries between the public sector, the private sector, the voluntary sector, and the household. According to Murray (Murray, Caulier-Grice, Mulgan, 2010) in the “Open Book for Social Innovation” in 2010 innovations are new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society’s</p>

	capacity to act. This has done quite a lot during the project: new methods have been experimented with and demonstrated the urgent need to respond to new challenges, with new tools.
<b>Local and global</b>	In the era of irreversible globalization there is a mounting need, and desire, to affirm the local dimension of change. While we seem to have very few instruments to affect global dynamics, we, as citizens, feel much more empowered in taking decisions and participating in innovative projects, at the local level. Without forgetting the international EU dimension, a project such as “Connecting Generations” value the local experience and bring that to the common learning space. So, that we could rephrase famous lemma “think globally, act locally” and the contrary is also true “think locally and act globally.” They both show the validity of crossing perspectives in projecting: fostering intergenerational learning is an EU challenge that develops in different national contexts. Comparing situations and practices made the project concretely “glocal.” In particular, older people can be considered as guardians of traditions, mainly local, while youth tend to be virtually connected to the world dimension of education and communication.
<b>Network</b>	There is an immense amount of literature about networking, network societies, social networks and network analysis that would be impossible to list here. One of the most famous gurus of networking is Spanish sociologist Manuel Castell who defined a network as the new social morphology of our societies (Castells, 1996). “A network” was also the shape of our collaboration: a network of knots we were during project implementation and each knot also belonged to other networks different from the “Connecting Generations” one. In other words, the ties through which any given social unit, in this case, project partners, connects, represent the convergence of the various social contacts of that unit. The enormous potentiality of networks is their scaling up power.
<b>Participation</b>	This is also another, often controversial, the key concept of our times: it is invoked by all, in different

	<p>degrees, but very little practiced beyond certain circles. There is, according to the dialogue in “Connecting Generations,” a high degree of hypocrisy about participation, due to the great allure of the word. It is used by EU policy makers, national politicians, non-governmental organizations and associations leaders as well as others, but it is often just a mask of a very evident failure of citizens' organizations. In times of crisis and disaffection in the public space, traditional participation intended as a set of mechanisms to express one's own opinion and exert influence on political, economic, management or other social decisions often remains at the level of consultation or information. Even in EU projects participation is often on paper rather than in reality. Participation and sharing could have been stronger also in “Connecting Generations,” in particular, some of the partners involved had less familiarity with the concept of participating not only in mobility but also in the governance of the project and the monitoring of its objectives and expected results.</p>
<p><b>Sharing</b></p>	<p>This word is, with creativity and solidarity, one of the three “solution concepts” agreed upon by “Connecting Generations” partners. We belong to a future of shared knowledge, shared economy and most of all, shared destiny. Unless we contribute to change from the local dimension, with shared solutions, no one will do it in our place. A project such as “Connecting Generations” can also be seen as a socio-economic system built around the sharing of human and physical resources: it shares creation, production, distribution, and consumption of intellectual goods and services by different people and organizations, in eight different countries. Sharing always existed in human cultures, and youth and older people have lived different experiences of it: our older generations shared the burden of reconstructing Europe after the Second World War while youth is building a shared global knowledge repository through open access and crowdsourcing.</p>
<p><b>Solidarity</b></p>	<p>The crisis has sharpened the sense of urgency to</p>

	<p>review fundamentally the way our society functions and more often the concept of “solidarity,” as opposed to “competition” is introduced. According to US activist Paul Hawken (2007), we are experiencing a rise of a blessed unrest multitude who is, collectively, claiming for change and a more solidarity-based social fabric and a more ecological and sober living. In his words, from billion-dollar non-profits to so-called “single-person dot causes,” these groups collectively comprise the largest movement on Earth. It is a movement without leaders, largely ignored by politicians and the media and organizing, like in nature, from grassroots. It is happening around us, and our role as social innovators and educators is to spot change based on solidarity and give it the visibility mainstream media would never agree to do. “Connecting Generations” was mainly about intergenerational solidarity: it recognized conflicts-of-interests, of priorities, but defended the primacy of bonds and common objectives.</p>
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*Source:* Own elaboration.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical framework, as well as the qualitative results of the research presented above, carry a wealth of meaning, input, and suggestions that accompanied the professionals involved in “Connecting Generations” well beyond the end of the project activities. Those concepts are all still very actual, and further experimentation of this action research approach can contribute to the challenge of building empowered, resilient, and inclusive communities from grassroots through adult learning and intergenerational learning. The way we act depends on the idea of Europe we have in mind and in our hearts: for us, it should be a society that values, instead of shunning, a difference of cultures, ages, sex, religion and any other. It should be a society that does not see a certain category of people, be it young, older, migrants or minorities, only on the basis of what they lack or need, but on the contrary on the richness of their approach in a non-standardized community. In the age of liquid fear, using Bauman powerful

image, learning and dialogue among generations and cultures are an antidote to hate speech and to ignorance and fear that leads to it.

We noticed that “Connecting Generations” had not only connected generations in the seven EU partner countries plus Turkey. It also connected municipalities and regional governments, public and private sectors, professionals and volunteers, local population and migrants and especially different visions of, and actual living in Europe. We all shared a common objective: recognizing how Europe had dramatically changed in its demographic composition, we made a sincere effort to imagine, build, experiment and test innovative practices of intergenerational learning and solidarity that could enhance an enriching dialogue between youth and senior citizens.

Some of the countries involved, Italy and Greece most of all, faced an urgent problem in terms of welfare for senior citizens and “Connecting Generations” was in itself an opportunity to test how, at the local level, lifelong learning policies, could contribute, consistently with economic and social policies, to improve the quality of life not only for the older adults but all.

Putting the accent on research and collection of results has been quite an interesting lesson learned in fact: as mentioned above, learning partnerships were meant to give an opportunity to smaller organizations to strengthen an EU dimension also. The latter are not always prepared to keep pace with the research. They often do not have the intellectual tools to do that since their mission is quite different. On the contrary, bigger organizations, less used to research, might not be so “grass-root” and have still a lot to learn from smaller field-based organizations. Nevertheless, all tried to contribute and certainly, although to different degrees, learned new skills and competencies that have become useful in other EU projects, or in local interventions, especially in terms of self-evaluation.

Coming back to the hypothesis from which this paper has started, we emphasize that:

- Initiatives of non-formal education geared toward intergenerational learning, promoted by civil society organizations, in collaboration with private and public

stakeholders and supported by EU funds, represent a significant contribution toward cohesion and well-being of communities.

- A transformative education approach is on the basis also of training of what we called “intergenerational trainers,” that have the necessary skills, identified in a clear competence framework, to facilitate intergenerational learning in innovative settings and with mixed techniques, from participatory world-café to digital story telling.
- The challenge in front of us appears to be how to link local quality experiences, often scattered and isolated, within a European and transnational dimension. In CONGENIAL, this gap has been filled thanks to the international partnership network, which has also created a fertile field of collaborative learning for operators and learners alike. The activities created visibility and recognition of intergenerational learning activities in local communities and were at the same time recognized at the EU level, through LLP national agencies.

From all the above, developed during the two years of the CONGENIAL project, the significant role that more and more people are gaining in educating communities for the well-being of citizens emerges everywhere. These are communities where education is conceived as shared accountability and a common framework of values, thus raising awareness about the culture of solidarity and inclusion facing the challenges through the reinforcement of the concept of “membership” and the promotion of a greater contact between the school, families and the territory in order to re-launch the social dynamics and to innovate community relationship.

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