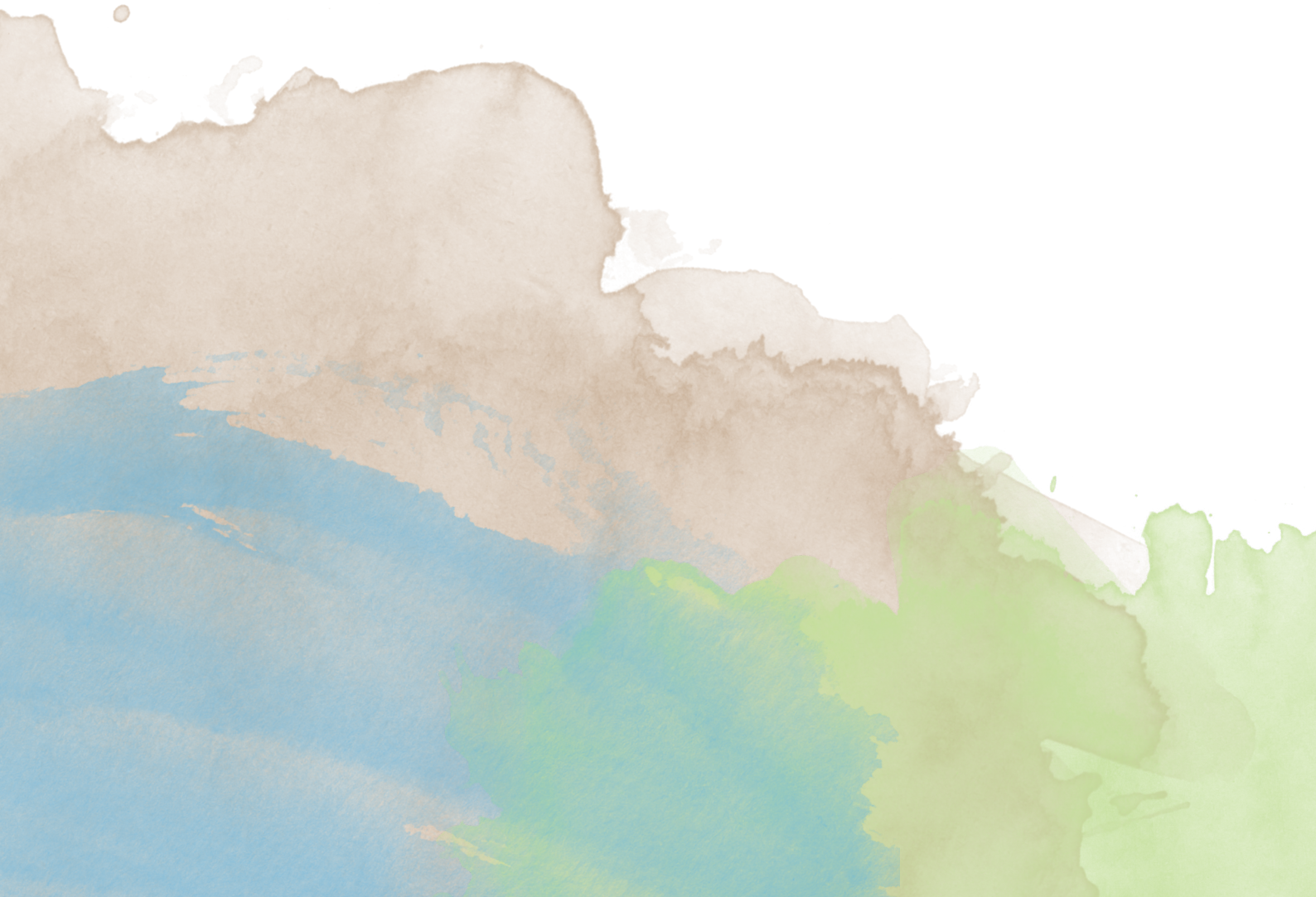


A European strategy for the elderly

The irreplaceable role of community life

Bahá'í International Community
Brussels Office



The development of a new European strategy on elderly people is an opportunity to recognise the myriad ways elderly people continue to contribute to their societies, and to identify core conceptions and approaches that can further enhance their capacity to do so. Framing the strategy in this way will ensure that the narrative around ageing societies transcends conceptualization of the elderly as a burden on strained pension and healthcare systems. Furthermore, while the strategy should address the important recurrent theme of overcoming loneliness and societal isolation among elderly people, it should also acknowledge that societies are in great need of the wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom of older generations—alongside younger ones—to pave constructive paths forward in the face of mounting social challenges.

Fostering a strong pattern of community life at the local level

Addressing the above considerations will require the development of vibrant patterns of community life, and a re-examination of cultural conceptions of who we are as a society and how we ought to relate to one another. In addressing the question of who we are, more attention ought to be given to the community as an entity in its own right—alongside the individual and the institutions of society—and to its role in nurturing a sense of meaningful connection and belonging.

Promoting meaningful relationships

One crucial component of strengthening patterns of community life are meaningful bonds between individuals and families. Where these can be forged, elderly people—along with their neighbours—feel an integral part of a network of mutual support and reciprocity, where they not only have someone to rely on, but know that others depend on them, too. This vision goes beyond creating an industry of professional care, important as this may be, to considering how a culture of caring for others can be woven into the fabric of society. The strategy could give thought, for instance, to how institutions such as municipalities, schools, religious institutions, community centres, arts organisations, or health promotion entities can help foster or tap into existing encounters among residents and create processes where they can work together in meaningful ways for the betterment of their communities that they themselves identify.

“

The new strategy is an opportunity for Europe to rethink the fabric of European society [...] and to offer channels through which the innate desire within people of all ages to contribute meaningfully to their society can find practical expression.

Strengthening intergenerational collaboration

A flourishing community is also one which is intergenerational in nature and avoids treating elderly populations as a group separated from the rest of society. On the one hand, a society that embraces every individual—regardless of their age or other factors—must be founded on the conviction that every generation can contribute to the well-being and progress of all. On the other hand, there is a great diversity of circumstances among individuals who would be considered ‘elderly’, and as such, they cannot be treated as a homogenous group. Thought therefore needs to be given to how intergenerational bonds can be strengthened throughout society, beginning at the grassroots of community life. For example, how can the elderly act as a source of experience and wisdom for younger generations? How can children and youth be of service to the elderly? How can spaces be created that foster connections between different generations?

Seeing elderly people as protagonists of community life

A sense of loneliness and isolation can set in when an individual is no longer regarded as having something of worth to contribute to others, as though the productive part of life is now spent. And yet, the desire to contribute meaningfully to society, to have a purpose beyond one’s own needs, does not disappear because one has reached retirement age. Broadening a conceptualisation of what it means to contribute to society—beyond narrowly attributing this to remunerated employment—is thus fundamental to appreciating elderly people as protagonists of community life.

From this perspective, while it is critical to meet the specific care, resource, and health needs of elderly people, it is important not to reduce them to these needs. Even in the face of physical limitations, older members of society contribute to their communities in a myriad of ways. Furthermore, continued physical and mental activity not only improves health and well-being, it allows the wealth of knowledge and experience that this population has accumulated over their lifetimes to be harnessed for the common good.

Conclusion

There is a need for conversations, at all levels of society, about what the concept of “community” entails and how it can be built at the grassroots. Such conversations should be inclusive and enriched by a diversity of viewpoints, drawing insights from the many populations that have made Europe their home and whose perspectives will be invaluable in addressing this fundamental question.

A long life expectancy is a strength of European society, thanks to advances in material prosperity. Alongside this material progress, the new strategy is an opportunity for Europe to rethink the fabric of European society, to address the root causes that underpin isolation and loneliness as they are manifested across all segments of society, and to offer channels through which the innate desire within people of all ages to contribute meaningfully to their society can find practical expression.

