

**Mariano Sánchez Martínez**

University of Granada  
Spain

## Intergenerational work, a necessary aspect in thinking political participation of seniors

Whenever political participation of older persons is thought of this usually means: (i) considering older persons as a sort of social group, one integrating all people aged above a certain number of years (65 or so); (ii) linking ways of political participation of seniors to the general ways of participation available to other people in the population (mainly adult citizens); (iii) setting political participation within the limits of formal process established by the State or smaller political units such as provinces and local constituencies; (iv) political participation in general and that of older persons in particular is sometimes discredited because it is highly partisan and/or self-serving.

We suggest approaching political participation of seniors from a different perspective, one based on the following beliefs:

**(i) Older persons are not a social group** as they have been characterised because, generally speaking, having a certain age is not a valid criteria to establish relevant differences among individuals. Instead of looking at human beings as dependent on their age, we should consider their age (and the meanings associated) as the dependent variable, i.e. an aspect that can only be understood depending on the lifespan and the life trajectory of each person. This change of approach is clarified in the following statement: Instead of believing that **"AGE EXPLAINS THE PERSON"** we should privilege the idea that **"A PERSON'S LIFESPAN EXPLAINS HIS/HER AGE"**.

From this new perspective it becomes clear that an issue relevant for a person aged 85 could be relevant as well for one aged 20. This implies a whole change in terms of the way in which we have usually thought the social order in modern structures (individuals are more or less clustered into different life stages such as childhood, youth, adulthood, and third age). Consequently, **Intergenerational issues** (actions, problems, needs,...) emerge as central aspects to understand political participation of seniors.

**(ii) Older persons might implement political participation in original ways, different from the ones typically associated to adults or any other age group.** If ageing is not an identical process in all human beings, then actions undertaken by aged individuals can be different. Therefore, instead of just looking at how older adults practice some established ways of political participation we should concentrate moreover on how they can innovate these ways. To this regard, fostering the concept of productive ageing seems appropriate because this concept emphasises how older persons contribute to the welfare and benefit of the wider society.

**(iii) Political participation of older persons is not circumscribed to official political and administrative contexts and paths** (for instance, those set at State level); informal ways of participation are significant as well. This comment has to do with the fact that some analysis concentrate on official and therefore more visible ways in which older adults participate politically (voting rates, political parties affiliation, membership in political bodies,...). However, there is an extremely important amount of political participation implemented in a more informal and non-official way, yet key to understand the whole issue of political participation. Hence, the **need to wide the concept of political participation** in order to include as well informal ways such as education to be

well informed on public issues, participation in public meetings concerned with community issues, discussing public issues with family, friends, and neighbours, writing letters to newspapers on public issues; participating in talk-radio programs on public issues, and so on.

**(iv) Older people vary greatly in their perspectives on civic affairs.** Yes, some elderly peoples are narrowly protective of their interests, may be focused on protecting their financial circumstances, and interested on immediate issues because they recognise that they do not have long to live. However, elders may as well be very generous and have a very long-time in their approach to civic affairs. Many elderly people are appreciative of the benefits of the public provisions that they have enjoyed and are strongly supportive of initiatives that will bring benefits to public life far in the future (Caro & Sánchez, 2005). To this regard, **altruistic and socially engaged initiatives such as volunteering are relevant practices** whenever we look at political participation of seniors.

These four elements are suggested to be the main components of a frame within which rethinking political participation of older persons in European Civil Society. This frame could be represented as follows:



In this presentation we are going to develop one of these four components, **intergenerationality**, and its connections to informal/formal political participation, productive ageing and volunteering. We'll try to demonstrate how and why intergenerational practices (especially those outside the family system) do constitute a nurturing element to strengthening the European Civil Society in terms of the quality of its political participation. Our assumption is the following: whatever form of political participation of seniors is considered, it should be done taking into account that our societies have to be societies for all ages, i.e. a multi and inter-generational societies.