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Intergenerational Equity: Policies for all Generations

Ottawa – Terms like “crisis” and “unsustainability” dominate talk about our aging society today. A growing older generation, we are told, is consuming more than its fair share of resources. But aging baby boomers may not be the problem. The problem may be our frame of reference.

A joint report from CPRN’s Family Network and The Change Foundation, with additional support from the Law Commission of Canada, proposes a new framework for policies that involve sharing scarce resources across generations. In *What’s Fair? Ethical Decision-making in an Aging Society*, author Nuala Kenny applies what she calls the “ethic of care” to the challenge of intergenerational equity.

“What all of us need, from decision-makers in our major institutions to ordinary citizens,” says Kenny, “is a new way to think of the relationship between the generations, one that unites rather than divides us.”

The “ethic of care” stresses the dignity of all persons and the good of the entire community or society. It focuses on relationships and the interdependence of citizens throughout the lifespan.

“The experience of infancy, or of aging, is not something that happens to only one generation,” Kenny points out. “These are stages in the shared experience of a lifetime. To treat them as generational events is to miss their connectedness.”

The way we frame an issue determines how we go about resolving it. Kenny argues that a focus on “child poverty,” for example, masks its connection to low-wage labour markets, pay and employment equity, family friendly policy, high quality day care, and other measures that address parental poverty, especially women’s poverty.

Kenny starts from the position that public policy is a moral endeavour, a reflection of who we are and what we desire to be as a society. She provides some guiding principles to help us think about what is fair in an aging society:

- *Respect for persons of all ages.*
- *Meaningful autonomy* – the fullest participation possible in decisions affecting one’s health and security.
- *Solidarity* – acknowledging the sharing of risks and benefits across the lifespan by all citizens.
- *Protection of the vulnerable*
- *Responsible citizenship* – encouraging all to participate in public policy decisions in an informed manner.
- *Accountability* – transparent accounting for decisions, their ethical justification, and consequences for present and future generations.
- *Sustainability* – concern for the needs of today’s and future generations.

These ethical principles are intended to foster policy choices consistent with Kenny’s conception of intergenerational equity and the web of relationships that underpin it. She makes it clear, however, that they are only a starting point.

“Some of these principles are related, others are potentially conflicting. There is no priority implied, and their application will depend on the specifics of a situation,” says Kenny.

“This isn’t a magic answer to difficult public policy choices, but it helps us focus our deliberations on the ethical issues at stake. It also assumes, rightly, that the search for a fair society is one all generations share.”

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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