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INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DEVELOPMENT *

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Families organize production in most developing countries. They marshal much of the capital and labor invested in exploiting natural resources, raising crops and livestock, and making and marketing goods and services for sale. By adding to capital formation and income, this family-based production is part and parcel of social and economic development. Families also engage in a host of other activities, broadly termed social reproduction, essential to the survival of family and society from generation to generation. Families make much of what they consume. They support the young, the old, and the disabled. They see that skills and values are passed on to children. They monitor and channel the behavior of family members. Activities geared to reproduction also contribute to social and economic development. The well-being of individual family members is significantly affected by family decisions like how food is apportioned, who gets medical care, and whether children go to school or to work in the fields.

This paper focuses on intergenerational relationships, primarily those between the oldest generation and their adult children. Some intergenerational ties are closer than others. Culture or affinity dictate special parent-care responsibilities for certain offspring just as the older generation feels special obligations to particular children and heirs. Daughters may marry out of the family, and parents can lose track of children who move away. An intergenerational focus encompasses considerable diversity of human circumstance. Intergenerational relations in adulthood embrace vigorous middle-aged and older people who direct the lives of younger adults as well as fragile elderly long dependent on their own aging children. This diversity underscores major issues in intergenerational family life--the renegotiation of family members' roles and responsibilities as they grow older.

The paper emphasizes how intergenerational relations in the second half of life influence development. This influence is felt in decisions about how material resources are distributed among family members and how family members' time and energy are allocated to various activities. Who gets what and who does what have obvious humanitarian implications for the well-being of individuals, but these decisions also have significant consequences for economic development, particularly in terms of the productivity of labor.

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In examining the intergenerational connection to development, it is useful to focus on three related issues--generational control, old-age dependency, and productive labor. These are universal issues, but how they work themselves out depends on sociocultural context and the resourcefulness of families.

Generational Control

In many developing societies of the globe, generational relations are hierarchical. Older people exercise considerable power over the lives of younger family members. They choose their spouses, direct their work, and pocket their earnings. Old people control others, if only because they control valuable resources such as land, money, technical expertise, legal authority, or magic. Of course, power over people is itself a resource. It can be mobilized both to secure more material resources and to extend control over still other parties. In later life, the generational hierarchy may become an even more important resource as one's network of allied age-peers and patrons is thinned by death.

In some cultures, older people's power is a generational entitlement giving older people special rights to tell offspring what to do and special claims to the rewards of their descendants' labor. This sort of entitlement is seen in the upward wealth flows pointed out by Caldwell (1982). Sometimes, the power of older people derives from their fiduciary responsibilities to younger generations. Power is coupled with expectations that they will manage family resources for the good of its members, particularly to maintain the younger generation and secure its future. This responsibility requires managerial authority over activities of younger family members.

Older people who enjoy this power of generational privilege are the family decision-makers whose preferences determine descendants' fertility, grandchildren's nutrition, family farming practices, and labor migration patterns. This sort of influence often falls to the family head, usually a man whose wife acquires her authority by association. Authority may be limited to certain domains. For example, older women may dominate the lives of younger wives or daughters-in-law, but have little to say about rents or cropping patterns.

Even where they don't have the final say (or where they delegate responsibility to others), the older generation may still be a significant force influencing the outcome of the decision-making process affecting family members. The obvious implication is that their views matter in development. Development programs have sometimes bypassed the influential older generation under the stereotypical assumption that older people are inflexible and resist innovation (Treas and Logue, 1986). However, programs that fail to give older people a stake in change are undoubtedly more likely to encounter resistance from the senior generation.

In general, economic development and macrosocial change

reduces the control of parents over grown children, because other institutions (e.g., market, state) emerge to break the family's monopoly on the organization of social activity as well as its lockhold on access to the economic means of support (Thornton and Fricke, 1988). Schools provide vocational training, peers give guidance in the conduct of life, and wage jobs offer an independent source of livelihood. The senior generation's resources translate into less clout over descendants when the young have more alternatives open to them.

Declining generational power is not inevitable. Land controlled by elders, for example, may become a more valuable resource given population pressures and/or new farming techniques which raise its productivity. Also, the family continues to be central in reproductive activities even as it becomes the focus of less and less production. Urban workers, for example, often count on their children being raised on grandparents' subsistence farms in the countryside. In fact, city dwellers frequently look to these family homesteads as the place where they will make their home when they become too old or too sick to work.

Old-Age Dependency

Although some older people have considerable power over younger generations, others do not. Their lives are shaped by family decisions over which they have little or no influence. They are usually older people who can make no claims to power, because they have no resources to back them up. Instead, they must depend on younger family members. Having no alternatives, they have no real bargaining power with children and grandchildren. To be sure, many elderly, lovingly supported by their descendants, see themselves not as abject dependents, but as superordinates fully entitled to their offsprings' devotion (Cain, 1990). There is no denying their vulnerability, however. With diminished physical capacity and scant resources, their survival would be threatened by family discord, the death of an able-bodied breadwinner, or any of a host of calamities that can befall them.

These dependent aged include aging parents who have become too sick or frail to carry out any work or even to manage their own lives. Confined to bed, they are invisible to the community and, hence, unprotected by local public opinion regulating intergenerational relations. Even cultures that mandate a high level of respect for older people in general tend not to require that frail, demented, or dying elderly receive much consideration (Foner, 1985). Poor families face difficult decisions about how meager resources are to be allocated. When old people fail, impoverished offspring are hard put to "prolong the inevitable" with medicine, extra food, or special care--especially when food is in short supply, children's school fees are due, and labor is required elsewhere. The aged often concur in these allocation decisions. They are powerless to object, and reciprocity norms of intimate family groupings encourage them to temper their expectations as their own contributions to family welfare decline.

Women make up a disproportionate share of the disadvantaged members of the older generation. Since women marry men who are older than themselves, they typically outlive their husbands. Because property often passes to children at (if not before) the husband's death, a surviving widow with no assets of her own, barred by convention from remunerative employment, is left to rely on children. It is they who decide what family resources are allocated to her support as opposed to other purposes. Because older women are useful in household production, they may be more welcome in households than old men, who are not well schooled in life-long subordination to other family members. Old men, however, can typically count on a wife's care in their later years, frail old women have only their descendants to help them with the activities of daily living.

Older people with children, of course, are better off than those without. Less developed countries lack public old-age security systems, private relief organizations targeting the aged, and safe insurance or savings vehicles. Absent this infrastructure for old age support, care of the older generation continues to be the responsibility of the intergenerational family.

Most policy-makers in the third world would like to keep children responsible for the elderly. Their fear is a breakdown of family support systems for the aged. Widespread family failure to care for older relations could generate pressures for a public response. This would divert scarce funds from development projects to the maintenance of what policy-makers see as one of the least productive segments of the population. Sometimes, these worries are overblown--based on the misbelief that older family members in developed, Western countries have been shamelessly abandoned to the care of the state (Martin, 1988). Nonetheless, there is some legitimate cause for concern, because development and macrosocial change can work against intergenerational support systems. For example, demographic changes may mean relatively more elderly parents and relatively fewer adult children to care for them. Given labor migration, children no longer live close enough to provide day-to-day care, even if they remit money to aging parents. The pressures of unrelenting poverty, however, probably constitute a bigger threat to family support of the aged than do the dislocations of macrosocial change.

In short, advanced old age leaves the senior generation with a weaker claim on family resources and less control over their allocation. Older people must rely more and more on offspring. How the younger generation balances the needs of the aged against competing demands on limited family resources has humanitarian and developmental implications. For the foreseeable future, it is clearly desirable that old age support remain with the intergenerational family. LDCs have mandated family responsibility by sharply limiting other options (e.g., making only the childless eligible for public assistance) or by punishing offspring who would shirk their duties (e.g., by dumping elderly dependents in acute

care hospitals). Less often pursued is an alternative approach--enhancing the contributions of the aged to their families. For example, one program raised the family standing of older people merely by making maize meal available to them alone for purchase at near cost (Cattell, 1992). A similar result has also been noted when even very small pensions are awarded the aged.

Productive Labor

The nature and extent of the older generation's contributions to the family are linked to both intergenerational control and old-age dependency. Older people in charge of family affairs bring a lifetime of experience and managerial authority to the organization of family activities. For example, an older farmer's experience with his own land under different crops and varying weather patterns can translate into higher agricultural productivity. The old, however, continue to make contributions even when they no longer efficiently organize the day-to-day labor of offspring or serve as final arbiters of family disputes.

As Cain (1990) has noted, concepts of retirement and dependency are not meaningful in LDCs where the aged the aged continue to work as long as they are able. In lieu of retirement, there is sometimes a process of generational succession more akin to "stepping down" (Plakans, 1989). As physical capacities decline, older people may gradually cede more day-to-day responsibilities and routine decision-making authority to heirs. This may be in the spirit of delegation, or it may involve an irrevocable transfer of authority. Some older people retain property until death (a common strategy for insuring good treatment by heirs). Others make inter vivos transfers, perhaps with negotiated understandings about the mutual obligations of the generations.

Stepping down may bring more idle time, but older people almost always continue to perform productive labor of one sort or another. Indeed, an important aspect of intergenerational families is their capacity to marshal the productive efforts of a marginal labor force that includes children as well as older people. These family workers make genuine contributions to the domestic economy. Whether or not their production exceeds their consumption, their work is an offset to the costs of their support.

Older people, particularly older women, look after children, process foodstuffs, prepare meals, and keep house for younger generations. They are central in subsistence and home production activities. They tend vegetable gardens. They watch over livestock. They make things for family use as well as for sale and barter. They teach practical skills, pass on cultural traditions and values, and monitor the comings and goings of household members and hired laborers. In the complex household division of labor, these activities are essential in their own right to family maintenance and social reproduction. The contribution of the aged is not only that they accomplish them, but

also that they free other family members for more productive labor (e.g., paid employment or the seasonal demands of agricultural production) or for necessary work that is a poor fit with the aged's capacities (e.g., long treks to gather firewood or haul water).

Some societies, notably the People's Republic of China, have been successful in mobilizing the labor and expertise of the older population in community service (Tout, 1989; Tracy, 1991). However valuable these efforts, most of the aged's productive contributions to social and economic development are apt to be those undertaken in the context of the family. Families are better suited than more bureaucratic enterprises to allocate jobs and adapt tasks to the changing capacities of older people and to find productive work even for the frail and homebound. Family loyalty and common economic interest undoubtedly motivates older people to greater effort than that elicited by broader collectives or more impersonal agencies. Productive contributions in later life reassure the oldest family members that they have not survived only to become a burden to their children.

Conclusion

Intergenerational control, old-age dependency, and productive labor contributions of the older generation influence family decisions about work, investment, resource transfers, health care, and food allocation. Thus, intergenerational relations have implications for social welfare and economic productivity. These developmental consequences are not limited to the microsocial level, because families' successes and failures in internalizing the costs of social reproduction, including old age support, have implications for the allocation of public resources as well.

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