

Moldova

Hack Your Age! Creating digital and social connections between younger and older people

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

Older and younger people in Moldova are working together to build intergenerational social connections and improve their digital skills. This project, delivered by HelpAge in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), was designed and implemented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – a crisis that exacerbated the social isolation many older people experience.

The project is cultivating a change in attitudes and perceptions between older and younger Moldovans. Young volunteers support older people to learn basic digital skills. They teach them how to use social media and online applications (apps) to stay in contact with friends and family, as well as how to access social support services online.



In support of:



What problem or issue did the project address?

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the discrimination that many older people experience. Not only were older people often more vulnerable before the pandemic, but the pandemic response has failed to consider their specific needs. Moldova – a country where 21.5 per cent of the population is aged 60 years or older – exemplifies how older people often live in isolation, with limited social contact and, in some cases, without the technological means to communicate with family and friends. This UNFPA-funded project was developed in the context of a state of emergency declared by the Moldovan government on 31 March 2021. It introduced stringent public health restrictions, which meant that people aged 63 years and over were unable to leave their home except for urgent needs.

Moldova's internet connectivity is among the best in the world, but many older people lack digital skills and access to the internet, and thus struggle to access online social services. These technological barriers mean that they are at greater risk during crises such as the pandemic. For example, in July 2020, when COVID-19 cases in Moldova peaked, an estimated 13,575 older people who could not access online social services were forced to queue at the office of the National Social Insurance House – many without personal protective equipment (PPE) – to request a pension recalculation.

What did the project aim to do?

The main aim of the project, called **Hack your age! Creating digital and social connections between young and old in Moldova (COVID-19)**, was:

“Empowerment and building social resilience of older persons by fostering intergenerational dialogue with young people and improving their access to quality social services, and through the employment of a human rights-based approach in building the capacities of social professionals.”

The project was designed in response to requests from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection to provide support to older women who were most affected by the pandemic and had often been overlooked by development programmes. It is innovative in its approach, as it addresses not only the health and social protection needs of this disadvantaged group, but also builds intergenerational dialogue by involving young people as trainers. When younger people help older people improve their digital skills, it lessens older people's physical, emotional and social isolation, and at the same time increases intergenerational understanding and relations.

How did the project work?

The project started in 2020 so had to work within COVID-19 restrictions in place at different points in time. It set up volunteer groups (each with at least 10 older people) in 15 communities, supported by 5 young volunteers in each community. With support from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), these groups served as ‘task forces’ to carry out project activities. They worked with 300 older people (most of whom were women), providing them with training and support on how to use a mobile phone, the internet and social media. They also taught older people how to access social services online (for example, for pension recalculations) and how to pay utility bills online.

The young volunteers also trained older people to learn digital skills that would help them keep in touch with family and friends – for example, how to make a phone call on a mobile, how to send SMS messages, how to top up credit, and how to take and share photos and videos (using apps such as Viber, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp). Some older people even uploaded short videos about their daily lives on Facebook. Others took part in online competitions, competing with one another to get the most ‘likes’ for their photos! The skills they learnt also helped them pursue their interests, as one older woman explained:

“Since I received the smartphone, I feel more connected and I socialise more. I found some old friends and relatives in social networks. Since I am passionate about beekeeping, I search the internet for treatment methods, remedies for bees... I exchange knowledge with other beekeepers.”



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The project also ran a series of group sessions to support older people to overcome challenges caused by the pandemic. The sessions focused on health and psychological counselling, sharing ideas about how to manage stress. They also covered issues such as how to prevent gender-based violence and how to access legal advice. One older woman who coordinated the volunteers in her village said:

“After the second [mobile phone] training for the older [participants], I had hardly reached home when I received a friend request on Facebook from another woman, aged 61 years. I was very happy because it meant the training was a success!”



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The project used a ‘training of trainers’ approach and the ‘learn by doing’ principle. HelpAge and information technology (IT) experts trained young volunteers so that they could share this learning with the older people taking part in ways that were accessible to them. This approach empowered the young volunteers to work with and support the older participants, providing a digital-focused transfer of intergenerational knowledge and skills. To reach older people who could not attend in-person sessions, the young volunteers conducted home visits (when COVID-related restrictions eased).

At the peak of the pandemic in Moldova, the young volunteers took food packages and PPE provided by the project to older people’s homes. This strengthened intergenerational relations even further, as the young volunteers were providing practical and social support. Delivering food and PPE, for instance, reduced older people’s risk of contracting COVID-19 as they did not have to queue for food or go out without a mask. The older people really appreciated this support, and expressed their gratitude to the young volunteers, local NGOs and HelpAge for reaching out to them in this way.

What changes did the project achieve?

One of the main successes was in helping older people to be more resilient to get through the pandemic. The range of project activities – from learning how to use smartphones to keep in touch with family and friends, to learning how to access services online – alongside the practical support (delivering food and PPE to older people’s homes) made a big difference to older people’s ability to cope. The project distributed information on COVID-19 and how to avoid getting it, through leaflets and flyers designed to be clear and accessible (for instance, using a large font size, and avoiding using medical jargon).

All participants gained basic IT skills and are now able to make phone calls, send SMS messages, use apps, and top up credit for online payments. Participants had highlighted the lack of opportunities to get involved in intergenerational activities locally. The project enabled all participants to experience a new way of interacting, and gained knowledge about communication and volunteering. Younger volunteers learnt how to offer guidance on setting up and using a mobile phone, installing and managing social media account settings, using mobile internet, and processing online payments. Their visits to older people to teach them these skills reduced the social isolation and depression that many older people experience.

For many older people, this was the first time they had been supported by younger volunteers. Some older participants who had felt isolated by the public health restrictions introduced due to COVID-19 reported that they now felt connected to their local social network (of volunteers, NGOs and local public authorities) as they could now communicate digitally. For example, one woman from Sarata Noua village started to use a smartphone and the internet for the first time at the age of 60. She has now joined a local Viber group, where community members and local authorities share news and information. Despite spending most of her time at home, she reported that she feels connected to the world. She also noted that the project has improved her overall wellbeing – not only because she has met new people from her village virtually, but also due to the project’s intergenerational activities (such as home visits by a young volunteer).

Another woman described how it has affected her life:

“For me, this phone is like a friend, because I’m not alone anymore... I talk online... with former co-workers, friends and relatives. I called the family doctor to find out some information about my medicines, and sometimes I call the local store to find out if they have any products I need.”



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What worked well?

Young volunteers agreed to offer support and guidance to older people and demonstrated commitment to the project. Through their involvement, local authorities became more aware of older people’s needs. Some local authorities also contributed to the food packages that the young volunteers distributed, and offered support to local NGOs and volunteer groups during the project by helping to identify potential participants, offering them free space for meetings and, in some cases, free access to the internet for project activities.

All participants reported that they had improved their communication and attitudes to ageing. Younger participants treated the older participants with respect and learnt how to conduct the training using age-friendly methods – for instance, being sure to use accessible language. By bringing generations together, the project challenged stereotypes around ageism and lack of interaction between younger and older people. Younger participants noted their misperception that older people do not want to learn about digital technology, while older participants changed their view about using phones and the internet, acknowledging that young people do not necessarily ‘waste time’ using digital devices. Participants also shared each other’s thoughts on learning, cultural activities and personal interests, creating an informal social support network. Younger and older participants alike identified new things they had learnt about one another – both similarities and differences. Some older participants explored new ways to share their knowledge and traditions with the wider public, such as ‘vlogging’ and uploading videos on YouTube.

What could be done differently?

Due to COVID-19 and related restrictions, many meetings and training sessions for participants had to be conducted online via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, as the restrictions prevented in-person training. Viber groups (a digital app for group chats) were created so that older people could keep in touch with each other and with the volunteers and NGO staff. At times this was challenging, because in-person training would undoubtedly have been more efficient and better for the older people taking part. For this reason, when the number of COVID-19 cases began to fall, some face-to-face and hybrid training sessions were organised. One of the biggest concerns among older and younger people when using the internet was how to guarantee online security when entering personal data, identity details, and bank account details for online payments, so other similar projects should consider ways to address this concern.

One aspect that could be approached differently is gender. The project activities did not specifically address older women’s needs, which can be different from older men’s needs. To address this, a comprehensive gender analysis, conducted at the project design stage, would identify gender differences that may affect the type of support older people need, both for learning digital skills and in other areas that would reduce their social isolation.

Younger volunteers reported that the main challenge they faced was their long-term involvement and time commitments, as they needed to be careful that project tasks did not interfere too much with their education.



Also, many young volunteers went to study in the capital city or overseas after graduation, so the project had to recruit and train new volunteers. The project design stage also made some erroneous assumptions – for instance, that the younger generation already has excellent digital skills and access to the internet. However, when activities began, it soon became clear that many younger people themselves had limited access to internet-capable devices, which also hindered their ability to access remote learning during COVID restrictions. There was therefore a need for greater investment in digital skills training for younger people, as well as training younger volunteers how to communicate with and train older people in digital skills.

Finally, another challenge was the limited or patchy internet and mobile phone coverage experienced by many communities in Moldova. To ensure that project activities can proceed, each community should have at least one facility equipped with computers, phones and Wi-Fi so that training and activities are accessible.

What can we learn from this project?

- Intergenerational solidarity is mutually beneficial for older and younger people, as they learn from each other, support each other, communicate with each other and break down stereotypes about age. By spending time together, older and younger people develop mutual respect, improving their relationships and understanding of one another.
- Some groups of people are at greater risk of digital isolation (such as those on low incomes and those who live in remote rural areas, where internet access is more challenging). These challenges are exacerbated during crises such as the pandemic, so the international community must do much more to ensure – as Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals demand – that we ‘leave no one behind’.
- Protection and social support services such as telephone helplines and consultations must be digitalised. Programmes must be implemented nationally and at community level, with extra measures taken to ensure that they are accessible to disadvantaged groups.
- Many older people are eager to learn digital skills. Developing these skills can help older people with limited social or physical mobility feel more integrated in community life and help them make new connections and friendships with people of different ages, locally and further afield. As well as gaining access to social support services online, learning digital skills can give older people the chance to continue in employment, and continue their personal development (for example, by enrolling in online courses).
- Older people have different training needs to ensure that the digital skills they learn are useful in their day-to-day life. To address this, there needs to be a wider range of training and information based on needs assessments conducted during the project design phase.

This case study is one in a series of ten, produced in connection with HelpAge’s guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

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