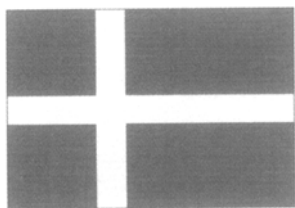


DENMARK

Pursuing an Active and Meaningful Life

By Henning Kirk



Productive aging is a notion that needs to be defined in a national and cultural context. In Denmark, as well as in other countries in north-western Europe, productive life has traditionally been

associated with having a job and with paid work in a narrow sense. Unemployed or retired persons have had a lower status than persons belonging to the labor force. During the past decade, however, there has been an ever-increasing interest in redefining productive life in old age. In Denmark, this interest has been encouraged by the recommendations of the Commission on Aging published in the early 1980s in which productive aging was defined both as an active and meaningful life for the individual older person and older people as a group were seen as a resource in society. In 1992, the 11th Nordic Congress of Gerontology in Odense used as its slogan: "Resources of the Elderly: Resources for the Elderly." The slogan was chosen to emphasize the fact that gerontology does not deal exclusively with the need of the frail elderly for services.

From a health policy perspective, productive aging may lead to a more rectangular functional life curve of the individual in society, determined by better physical as well as mental health. In terms of social policy, productive aging may parallel the older person's maintaining an independent life in his or her own home. Both

possibilities are of major political and economical interest, as better health and prolonged independence obviously reduce the needs for health and social services. Intervention studies carried out in Denmark have demonstrated such economical benefits. However, the knowledge of prevention programs is still insufficient concerning the labor market. Also, evaluations of the effectiveness of pre-retirement courses are needed. Ideally, an important objective of such courses is to encourage productive life after retirement.

Patterns of retirement and pension policies

Denmark was the first country in Europe to introduce a statutory limit defining the "onset of old age" as a part of the pre-pension scheme of 1891. Thereafter, allowances to low-income individuals age 60-plus could be authorized by local governments. In the 20th century, the pension payout age has been gradually raised to 67 for both men and women. However, the actual average retirement age has decreased to about 61 for wage-earners. This development was stimulated by the introduction of the Early Retirement Pay Act of 1979, which allows wage earners to retire at age 60 with the option of earning additional income by working less than 200 hours a year.

These trends do not indicate an emphasis on productive aging, as far as the number of employed seniors is concerned. However, new schemes are planned in order to redefine the roles of senior employees in the labor market. And new government proposals with regard to part-time employment may result in a further

diversity of retirement ages. Also, a newly published report from the National Commission on Pensions suggests that the age for early retirement pay be raised from age 60 to 63.

Productive aging—after retirement

Various activities have been initiated in Denmark to redefine roles of retired people in society. In 1982, the Commission on Aging recommended that public measures in future old age policy adhere to the principles of continuity, self-determination, and the use of people's own resources. Productive aging is now defined in terms of activities outside the labor market: adult education, senior advisors, voluntary network groups, and so on.

Denmark has a long history of adult education. By law, all local governments sponsor adult education schemes, which are offered by various educational associations. In the 1970s, one out of 10 people age 65-plus participated in such programs. In the beginning of the 1990s, one out of seven did so. An increasing number of courses are now planned and run independently by groups of older people. Some of these activities take place in senior centers that also provide services for people having various needs for assistance and care.

Another area with increasing activities for and by elderly people is the folk high school. Since 1970, special courses designed for retired people have become increasingly popular. Traditionally, Danish adult education focuses on general knowledge. This is also characteristic of special courses for retired persons. The objective is to encourage people to discuss issues of mutual interest. Such interactions may lead to the formation of networks and further activities after the conclusion of a course. An example of this is the formation of group housing projects. Housing for old people was, on one occasion, a matter of discussion during a course at a folk high school. Some of the participants organized after the course. Some years later a group housing project involving eight old women who had lived alone was established as a result of this very folk high school course. Inspired by this, similar experiences of group housing have been reported.

During recent years, folk high school courses involving elderly people traveling and studying abroad have also been developed. These courses not only aim at studying foreign cultures, they also tend to promote interaction between groups of elderly persons from different countries.

In this way, local governments seek to integrate social and cultural policies. One purpose is to discover resourceful elderly people who can assist their peers. Some municipalities have now initiated programs to train active senior citizens to become resource persons to frail and dependent people living in the community. An interesting example of productive involvement of senior citizens comes from the city of Nakskov. Here, a growing group of senior citizens have taken various initiatives to support the local government with tasks related to urban planning.

Apart from formalized adult education and folk high schools, various independent activities are initiated by elderly organizations. The largest of these, DaneAge, counts 250,000 members (of all ages) and covers local groups of active elderly people all over the country. Another example is the Academy of the Third Age, established in the late 1980s by a group of elderly persons retired from leading positions in society. The Academy has now developed into a system of independent study groups, individually reporting to the full membership and vividly engaged in public matters.

Changing paradigms of "productive life"

Productive aging can be seen as a phenomenon of the labor market: the development of new possibilities for part-time employment for seniors and more emphasis on special roles of senior employees, such as mentoring functions. However, a lower retirement age combined with longer life spans suggest that more emphasis be given to the role of the elderly after retirement. Productive life in old age is redefined during these years. It can include a variety of activities involving senior citizens in study groups, adult education programs, folk high schools, or independent groups. Productive aging can thus be regarded as lifelong learning and human interaction, offering to the individual the possibilities of maintaining physical and mental capacities and of adapting to new roles in society. ■

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