

No More Throw-away 'Elderly' People: Building a New Image of Ageing via a Time Accounting System

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Abstract. This paper investigates the potential of a special kind of local exchange system –a Time Accounting System (TAS)– in changing the traditional image of the elderly people. A TAS is a web-based software system that allows people to arrange transactions of time devoted to work inside a community. We report some findings from a literature survey perspective and from focus groups discussions that provide a comprehensive picture of the role of a TAS. This leads us to claim that a TAS is not only a supporting tool for the elderly people, but also a tool that might change the image of being elderly in the current society. Moreover, the review identifies the absence of a TAS in the developing countries, where “measures” to help people in their old age are considered as a necessity rather than a luxury.

1 Introduction

It is well known that global population is ageing. In most countries, this phenomenon is due to a combination of declining mortality and fertility rates (McKeon 2012). Although the images of ageing are different in developed and developing regions, there is an overall socially imposed constraint that portrays elderly as dependent and care receivers. For this reason, researches have been

carried out to support care and to investigate whether this image could be changed through the design of proper technologies (Cabitza & Simone 2010).

In particular, developed countries are presently passing an era of scarce governmental resources and declining social capital (Collom 2008), which ultimately poses threat to elderly care. Yet, these countries are exploiting the full benefits of technologies to face most of the challenges. Initiatives are oriented to help create and maintain the social network of interaction, trust, and exchange among different units of the society (Carroll 2013). One of these initiatives aims to develop systems like Timebanks, Community Exchanges, and Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) (Bellotti et al. 2013), where community members provide to each other small services according to their skills and availability, by relying on the reciprocity within the whole network of system members and by using local currencies. Among these alternative or local currencies Time Bank, which we call Time Accounting System (Cabitza et al. 2016), and TAS in the following, is spreading quickly in many countries (Carroll 2013), drawing the attention of the researchers towards its better understanding and support. TAS are well established to confirm that the things a society really needs are normally unpaid and are never received by the money economy (Cahn & Rowe 1998). Similarly, a TAS is considered as a potential tool for supporting the elderly people, since they are said to be ideal participants as often in need of services, with a lot of free time to give, and with the potential to benefit from intergenerational interactions (Cahn 2000). In this light, we investigated how a TAS can help elderly people in moving their image from that of ‘service receivers’ to that of ‘service providers’ and ‘value creators’. To this aim, we adopted a mixed approach: a literature review on the diffusion of TAS or similar systems in both developed and developing countries, by following the methodology proposed by (Peters et al. 2012, Saunders et al. 2011); focus groups discussions on the adoption of a TAS in a developing country, by following the methodology of (Chiarini et al. 2010). In this paper, we relate our findings to the support of elderly people that a system like a TAS may ideally bring, and to the potential transformation of the elderly life and image due to the introduction of a TAS in a community where this was found particularly suitable and feasible (Sultana et al. 2015, Cabitza et al. 2016).

2 Literature Review

2.1 History and Evolution

The world’s first TAS was found in Japan in 1973, where it was established by Teruko Mizushima. The basic idea of this initiative was to spend the time credit at any time during the life time of the participants, i.e. a person could earn time

credit at his young age and could spend or use it at any time of his life, even at his old age. In the 90s, a TAS was first introduced in the USA, with the name Time Dollars, as a medium of exchange which could create a way for encouraging and rewarding the work needed to build “strong and resilient communities” (Cahn 2000). This concept was then introduced in UK by Martin Simon with the name of Time Bank. There is a recent revamp in imagining the potential of TAS in facilitating active ageing through technology, as a means to enhance participation, engagement and local community cohesion and affection. Consequently, the traditional TAS (a paper based one) is being transformed into a web based TAS, usually implemented upon one of a few special purpose TAS or alternative currency exchange software platforms (Bellotti et al. 2014). TAS got popularity over other community exchange systems in a short time due to their simple features (Bellotti et al. 2013). At present, there are around 1715 projects of TAS across 11 countries and 4 continents (Seyfang & Longhurst 2013); notably, all of these are in the developed world.

The studies on TAS reported that male seniors, female seniors, female non-seniors, retirees and people from lower income group are the most common participants to a TAS (Bellotti et al. 2013; Collom 2007; Lasker et al. 2011; Seyfang & Smith 2002; Williams 2000). In the UK, most of the participants to a TAS are from socially excluded and underprivileged members of the society, whereas in USA the members are mostly well-educated, low income, politically liberal, and ethnic ones (Collom 2007). An exception to the previous studies is the work by (Ozanne 2010), who studied a TAS in New Zealand where the members are from a relatively affluent society and are more educated if compared with the members of other TAS.

2.2 Benefits for the Elderly

A number of researches have emphasized the role of a TAS in promoting both physical and mental health in the participants, particularly those who live alone and who are elderly (Boyle 2014; Gregory 2012; Hayashi 2012; Lasker et al. 2011; Seyfang & Longhurst 2013; Seyfang 2005). Elderly people feel more attached to their community through their participation in the exchange program of a TAS. Active participation in social work through a TAS helps them remain physically sound. Since the elderly people get the opportunity to be connected with the community through a TAS (Ozanne 2010), this helps them feel important for the society, and brings them psychologically uplift. More interestingly, our review found that the elderly people feel better when their medical treatments get associated with the service of the volunteers of a TAS (Dentzer 2002). Involvement with a TAS helps them feel safer as well as more attached to other members of the community, hence avoiding the condition of isolation in which

the people affected by sickness and by the feeling of being useless and frail very often fall in.

3 Focus Group Discussions

We discussed the issues related to the predicted benefits of a TAS in two focus groups sessions. One was made of 8 focus groups, for a total of 64 members (Bangladeshi), and consisting of 8 participants in each group. These focus groups were organized and moderated by one of the authors in summer 2014 in two phases, 4 in Italy and 4 in Bangladesh, on topics related to the adoption of a TAS in Bangladesh: for this reason, it was considered an exploratory focus group. These two groups share the same basic culture and the concerns that are motivated by their common experience to live in an urban area at the time of demographic transition. This fact made it possible to consider them as homogeneous enough to guarantee the soundness of our research outcomes. The second session of focus groups was held in Italy in autumn 2015, with a total of 12 participants split in 2 (uniform) groups of 6 participants each. This second focus group was a confirmatory focus group, as participants were asked to evaluate a web-based TAS prototype for confirming some of the themes emerged during the previous focus groups (the participants to the second round of focus groups were a subset of the participants to the previous one). There were differences and similarities for the two focus groups relative to TAS requirements. All the participants of the focus groups, both in Bangladesh and Italy, agreed with different extents on the fact that a TAS could have some positive impacts on the role of elderly people in the societies. The former let emerge an innovative requirement for a TAS application: the capability to transfer time-credit across communities living in the same urban area. The latter extended this requirement to allow the interaction among TAS systems across continents. A short report on this experience can be found in (Cabitza et al. 2016). For the present work, we focused on the themes related to ageing, as being introduced in point 2.2 of the previous section.

3.1 Intergenerational Linkage and Knowledge Empowerment

All participants agreed on the fact that a TAS could work as a bridge between two different generations. This interaction would bring benefit to both the groups in different ways. On the one hand, the senior usually getting alone and becoming dependent on others for trivial work would find opportunity to get involved with other people. This interaction would help them share their expertise with the people who need them, and sharing skill through a TAS would let them feel useful again to the society. On the other hand, the younger less privileged would get the opportunity to increase personal acquaintances and skills through an informal and inexpensive way. The participants all assume that a TAS would help define

“work” in a different way, and act as a databank for the local skills. The participants pointed that this would also help a person to be an entrepreneur by using, for example, the available local skills at the end of their regular service period.

3.2 Time-transfer capability

Also wealthy people, who are poor in time, may exchange their benefits with the work of elderly through a TAS community. A time-transfer mechanism to and from the “near and dear” has emerged as a mechanism conceivable for a TAS, as it may especially advantage an intergenerational and inter-community linkage. People poor in time may rely on the elderly of their community and of their family to gain time and services from them, and, at the same time, people more active in distant communities may loan time to their old dears. This second option may also help them get rid of guilty feelings for not being beside their old parents, and feel confident that this could really facilitate their distant family to receive back help from other neighbours in case of need.

3.3 Self-actualization

Participants stressed the necessity for such a system, since it would give them the facilities to help others and to show their latent skills. Usually, they would compel to take help from others and, moreover, they were frustrated they could do nothing in return. A TAS would facilitate them to help others and earn time that could be used for their need. It would help them have a feeling of independence and reciprocity. Participants emphasized that a TAS could be a platform for showing the skills of the people, particularly elderly and housewives, who are usually not engaged in the formal job market. This may balance in a more official and satisfactory way their visibility and the usefulness of their roles in the community. Furthermore, the opportunities of doing something for the community members would give them mental satisfaction, which they consider invaluable.

4 Conclusions

Researches on TAS are mostly limited to studying the impact of TAS involvement on participants in general and on policy issues for social capital development. This limitation is especially apparent in studies of elderly-focused TAS. In this regard, this work is a first contribution in exploring the potential new image of the elderly through a literature review and a qualitative research on TAS systems. To conclude, we could safely infer that a TAS can contribute in changing the image of the elderly from the image of someone who just needs care and receives it from keen caregivers, in the image of someone who is able to give

something back, in exchange to their caregivers or indeed to anyone in the TAS community.

5 References

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