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March 2017

ÉLAN RDC's Women's Economic Empowerment Learning Series:

Case Study 2

Exploring empowerment outcomes for poor female consumers using improved cook stoves in **Lubumbashi**

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BACKGROUND

Introducing ÉLAN RDC

ÉLAN RDC is a DFID-funded market systems programme working across ten highly differentiated and geographically-dispersed provinces in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The programme uses a facilitative and incentive-driven approach to address systemic constraints and structural barriers preventing poor people from benefiting from market systems. ÉLAN RDC works across six market groupings: access to finance (branchless banking and SMEs), perennial agriculture, non-perennial agriculture, river transport, renewable energy, and the business enabling environment. The primary objective of the programme is to increase incomes of 1.4 million poor men and women cumulatively by £138 million by 2021.

Understanding women and working-aged adolescent girls in DRC

Women and working-aged adolescent girls in DRC are some of the most marginalised in the world. Disproportionately high rates of poverty, inadequate access to basic services including education and health care, restricted access to and/or control over economic (both financial and physical) assets and limited influence over decision-making at all levels constitute some of the barriers facing women and working-aged adolescent girls in DRC. Harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic and intimate partner violence, and marital rape are widespread and further discriminate against women. Alongside a weak state presence, outdated legislation, and limited access to justice, these entrenched cultural norms and practices have impeded progress on gender equality, with the DRC ranking 176 out of 188 countries on the gender inequality index[1].

Women are concentrated in the informal sector, in predominantly low-skill, low-wage roles with very limited potential for upward mobility. In addition, women and working-aged adolescent girls tend to have multiple roles in DRC; they are often the principal income providers within a household while also undertaking unpaid and 'invisible' duties, such as caring for children and undertaking domestic tasks, resulting in women's triple burden and time poverty.

1 UNDP (2016), 'Gender Inequality Index', http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII

ÉLAN RDC's commitment to gender equality

Recognising poor women's particular disadvantage in accessing and benefiting from economic opportunities, ÉLAN RDC seeks to facilitate changes to gender-blind and/or discriminatory behaviours of market actors to realise sustainable results for poor and disempowered women, at scale. In addition to the programme's primary objective of poverty reduction, ÉLAN RDC aspires to contribute to women's greater economic empowerment, recognising this as a meaningful vehicle for broader social empowerment and gender equality. ÉLAN RDC aims to realise impact for poor women that goes far beyond a superficial focus on female participation and incremental income increase, instead working towards more transformative empowerment outcomes.

ÉLAN RDC's evolving approach to measuring women's economic empowerment outcomes

Recognising the limitations of income change as a proxy to understand gendered impact, and the inadequacy of sex-disaggregated data to do this[2], ÉLAN RDC has incorporated log-frame indicators at output and outcome level focussed on the progression of women's roles within market systems. ÉLAN RDC defines women as having adopted a "more beneficial role within a market system", when they experience any one or more of the below changes as a result of the intervention and over a sustained period:

- Greater job security
- Formalisation of role / employment
- Improved position in value chain
- Greater sustained opportunity for training and capacity development
- Improved working conditions

This definition was revisited and revised in early 2017, to also incorporate:

- Changes to women's roles within the household

This addition was made in recognition that a) the household is not distinct from – rather part of – a given market system[3], and b) the transformative potential of influencing women's roles within the traditionally 'private' sphere of the household, which is often difficult to affect through facilitative approaches.

The programme has developed a measurement approach using qualitative and quantitative SMART indicators to capture an instance in the change process, at a point in time. This measurement approach will be refined as the programme progresses, and better understands how women's roles change and the best ways of monitoring this.

While this focus on delivering and measuring changes to women's roles within market systems is pioneering, ÉLAN RDC wanted to go further still.

Recognising the importance of qualitative data for developing a richer understanding of gender-differentiated impact and individual pathways to change, ÉLAN RDC is committed to undertaking several supplementary qualitative studies on specific interventions. These qualitative enquiries form ÉLAN RDC's Women's Economic Empowerment Learning Series, which will both help the programme improve its delivery for poor women and build the currently limited evidence base on what works to economically empower women in DRC. This is the second case study in the learning series.

2 Adam Smith International (2016), 'Measuring Gendered Impact in Private Sector Development'.

3 Campbell, R. (2014) 'A Framework for Inclusive Market System Development'.

THE INTERVENTION IN CLOSE-UP: Targeting women as underserved consumers, marketing 'women-friendly' products & reducing women's unpaid care burden

Overview of partnership and intervention

In 2015, ÉLAN RDC formed a partnership with Halt Bank, an ICS producer and distributor based in Lubumbashi, to improve production quality; increase volume; and strengthen the company's financial, managerial and marketing & distribution capacity. The intervention was designed to address constraints to poor consumers' access to – and ability to finance – high quality ICS, as well as build their knowledge of the associated benefits of the product, while increasing sales volumes for Halt Bank. In 2015, Halt Bank sold 2,001 ICS to poor households in Lubumbashi, an significant increase in their average annual sale of 1,200 ICS in the years prior to ÉLAN RDC's support.

Exploring the potential to realise WEE

ÉLAN RDC also hypothesised that this intervention had the potential to disproportionately benefit poor women. The programme theorised that, as the primary users, household financial savings resulting from the use of ICS would be captured principally by women; that the known health benefits of ICS would be primarily felt by women; and that the time savings associated with reduced heating times had the potential to significantly reduce the unpaid care burden, which is borne almost entirely by women in DRC. The programme also acknowledged the potential for progressive shifts in women's roles, through improved working conditions and the liberation and reallocation of women's time from within – to outside of – the home.

A note on Halt Bank's current marketing strategy and why it assumes a male consumer base

While Halt Bank recognises that poor women tend to be the end user of ICS, their marketing strategy has, to this point, been developed primarily with a male purchaser in mind. Jean Pierre Kayembe, Managing Director of Halt Bank, explains the company's motivation for targeting men: "While we recognise that women are the main users of ICS, they don't control the purse strings, so we target the men instead […] women also don't tell other women about the benefits or affordable cost of ICS, as they want to retain the exclusive status that comes with owing an ICS here in Lubumbashi."

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Purpose of case study

This case study is the second in ÉLAN RDC's Women's Economic Empowerment Learning Series. It aims to test the theory of change that by increasing the availability, affordability, and quality of ICS:

- poor households benefit from net income increases through financial savings (typically through a reduced expenditure on charcoal, and in certain cases the reallocation of time away from unpaid care and towards productive activities);
- poor women benefit disproportionately because they – as the primary users – are the ones who capture the financial savings; realise health benefits; experience improved working conditions and witness a reduction in unpaid care; and
- poor women have, and seize, the opportunity to adopt new and improved roles within – and outside of – the household as a result of the benefits associated with ICS.

The research also wanted to test key assumptions, for example whether women controlled the increased income, and for unintended outcomes for women, such as changes to their perceived risk of violence.

In addition to better understanding the gender-differentiated impact of this intervention, this case study also seeks to test whether Halt Bank's justification for primarily targeting male consumers – over females – is both a) founded, and b) makes good business sense. This line of enquiry is informed by an estimation that Halt Bank's marketing & distribution practices may under-recognise women as an important and influential market segment, missing out on potential sales revenue for Halt Bank and limiting the potential number of poor women benefiting from the pro-women product.

Methodology

The data presented below was captured though two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in September 2016 with female and male members of households that had purchased ICS from Halt Bank. The case study is also informed by one Key Informant Interview (KII) conducted with the Managing Director of Halt Bank also in September 2016. Details on research design, sample characteristics and data analysis are provided in the Annex.

ÉLAN RDC recognises economic empowerment is an abstract, subjective and non-linear process. As such, the Conclusions section of the case study tries to resist assessing whether outcomes constitute 'empowerment' according to international definitions, instead seeking to privilege the women's own perceptions of 'positive change' and 'negative change' in their lives.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Summary of findings

The findings of the enquiry have been analysed, thematically organised, and are summarised below.

Poor households report financial savings owing to the purchase and use of ICS

Men and women expressed a unified view that, by using ICS, they had observed significant household savings. One woman estimated that the ICS had cut her spending on charcoal in half: "With the ordinary cook stoves we used to use 1000 FC worth of charcoal a day, but now with only 500 FC worth of fuel we have enough to service the needs of our families". Many others felt the financial savings were greater still and estimated using closer to a quarter of their previous use: "A bag that used to last 2 to 3 weeks, now lasts 2 to 3 months", explained one woman. Given that charcoal "previously formed a very large part of our household budget" in the words of one man, the implications of such a spending reduction on this one product are significant for poor consumers, contributing to meaningful and sustained net attributable income increases, once the cost of the ICS (30,000 FC) is discounted from the savings.

However, there is mixed evidence on the extent to which women 'capture' these savings by physically retaining the unused fuel budget

ÉLAN RDC had hypothesised that savings from the use of ICS could very well be captured by women, who, when using conventional cook stoves are typically given an allowance for household spending by their husbands. The assumption was that men would continue to allocate the same amount of money for household spending on fuel, meaning that women would retain the savings realised from shifting from a conventional to an improved cook stove. Many men corroborated this hypothesis: "the money I give my wife to manage the household hasn't changed even though I know she now spends less on charcoal", said one.

In other cases, the expectation is that husbands continue to allocate the same amount, but expect to see more from it: "I give her the same as before, but she buys other, additional things" explained one man. Several others acknowledged that the savings were now being used by their wives to grow or establish small commercial activities: "I give my wife the same and she uses the extra to make jam which she now sells in the street", explained another man within the group.

In other cases however, budgets for household spending appear to have been adjusted to recognise the reduced spending on fuel: "I do get a little less in cash, now that we know we need less fuel" explained one women.

Women influence decisions as to how the savings are used, but 'big-ticket' items require the approval of their husbands

Whether or not women physically retain the savings, they all agreed that they had a level of influence over how the financial savings are used. Often the idea for household spending originates with women, but typically they must seek the approval of their husband for 'big-ticket' items as part of the decision-making process. "My wife can propose [the idea], then we discuss and take the decision together", explained one man, with another adding: "The decision is taken by my wife and I […] We try to talk it through and then we find an agreement". This view was corroborated by many of the women, one of whom explained: "The woman of the house proposes an idea to her husband and in the majority of cases, he will then give his accord".

On a day-to-day basis, for more regular household spending, women expressed being able to make decisions without the need to consult their husbands. This view was echoed by several men, one of whom explained: "I prefer that my wife manages our household savings and deals with our needs, because I don't always manage to do so".

Women tend to propose spending choices that promote enterprise growth, improve family wellbeing, and increase their resilience to shocks

Women spoke of using the financial savings at a household level to promote enterprise growth, improve family wellbeing, and better manage economic shocks. Several women explained that they used the spare money to diversify or grow their businesses, with one clarifying: "With the savings obtained from using the ICS, I have increased the different types of products that I trade". Others, who had previously not engaged in productive, income-generating activities outside of the house, were now able to do so as a result of the financial and time savings resulting from the use of ICS. "I have started to buy, repackage and resell small bottles of wine" said one, with another expanding her family-owned restaurant: "we have been able to buy two ICS and it has helped grow our business as we are able to serve customers much quicker" said another.

Several women explained that the savings had helped to pay for washing machines, lessening women's unpaid care burden and enhancing their feelings of wellbeing, and one man spoke of how the savings had help to enhance the family's resilience: "The savings that we've made from using less fuel [in general], also help us to get through the more difficult times in the year, for example the rainy season where we used to use 3 or 4 sacks [of fuel]".

Women are instrumental in the decision to purchase an ICS and do so upon the recommendation of their peers

Women are instrumental in making the decision to purchase an ICS – and do so either in consultation with, or independently of, their husband. As one woman explained: "Most often, us women are the ones purchasing the ICS, using the small amounts of money we've saved from the allowance given to us by our husbands". While the women did acknowledge that: "there are cases where men purchase an ICS and bring it back to the home", these were described as less common, and both women and men both agreed that, in such cases, women will have influenced their husbands to make this purchase on their behalves.

Indeed men expressed an initial reluctance to purchasing an ICS. As one woman explained: "My husband was resistant to buying an ICS, so it was me who decided to buy it, and now that my husband sees that they are much more economical, it has given him greater confidence [in the product]".

The motivation for women to purchase an ICS tends to have been influenced by recommendations among women's own informal networks. As one woman explains: "I earn my own income, and based on the advice of friends, I decided to use some of my savings to buy an ICS". This was a common theme, with another stating: "I resented spending so much money on charcoal, as well as always feeling cold in the house, so I decided to buy an ICS on the recommendation of several of my friends".

Halt Bank's existing marketing strategy could therefore be revisited to increase uptake among poor women

These learnings are critical for reframing Halt Bank's marketing strategy which has until now, primarily targeted male consumers based on the company's assumption that a) men possess the purchasing power and b) women do not share information on the benefits and affordability of the ICS within their peer group to protect the ICS' image as a 'luxury product' and elevate their own status within the community. Both of these assumptions are called into question through our learnings. This means that for Halt Bank to realise increased sales volumes and for the benefits of ICS to be extended to as many poor households as possible, ÉLAN RDC's efforts should now go to supporting Halt Bank to reframe

its marketing strategy with the needs, preferences and behaviours of female consumers in mind.

Indeed, the primary reason why more poor women had not yet purchased an ICS, was simply that they were not aware of ICS, their benefits, and/or their affordability. As one woman explained: "Although many women do know about ICS, others do not have access to information or news. […] Often advertising comes onto the TV but it doesn't reach everyone". Another woman explained that it was the proven experience of their peers – rather than TV commercial, that would help women to understand the benefits, the financing options, and ultimately have the confidence to purchase an ICS. In her view: "Women prefer to wait and watch others try it out, before taking the decision to buy one themselves".

The time-saving benefits of ICS are primarily captured by women, and have led to a significant reduction in women's unpaid care burden

Beyond financial savings, women reported a significant reduction in the hours spent on domestic chores as a result of quicker heating times and sustained temperatures. As one women described: "With the ICS, we feel free. Before we used to wake up very early to get things ready for the children, but now we can leave the ICS on a low heat, with a saucepan of water, and in the morning the bathwater is ready to go". Men also observed a reduction in women's unpaid care burden: "Before, a woman needed to wake up, light the fire, continuously add fuel (at least three or four times) but with the ICS, she only needs to put one lot of fuel on and then she can relax". Women agreed, that on average, they were saving between 4 to 5 hours a day in time previously spent overseeing household chores, including heating, cooking, and fetching charcoal, with a positive impact on their wellbeing: "We used to wake up at 5am previously, but with the ICS, we now wake up at 7am", explained one woman.

This has not only liberated time for women's relaxation and leisure, but has also enabled women to allocate more or new time to productive activities, as previously described.

Again, these lessons reveal the opportunity to support Halt Bank to further refine their marketing strategy. Currently the sales strategy of Halt Bank is to promote the financial savings and health benefits for the product, with no explicit acknowledgement of the time-savings and what this means for women, as the primary users. By promoting the 4-5 hour daily time savings, alongside the other advertised benefits, Halt Bank could more effectively market ICS to poor

women, who experience high levels of time poverty and have greater influence over financial decisions than Halt Bank previously understood.

Beyond time and financial savings, the use of ICS has brought broader social benefits to poor households

The benefits of ICS extend far beyond cost and time savings for poor men and women in Lubumbashi. Men and women both noted a lessening of tensions within the household: "Our men have become increasingly calm, because, with the ICS, us women ask them much less frequently for charcoal", explained one woman, with another stressing: "Men gain as much as women because by using ICS, you use less charcoal and that brings peace to the house". A similar stance was expressed by men, with one man commenting that: "The quickness of [heating] the ICS helps give us time to look back on the day. We have much more time to share together, to talk about our days and to plan things as a family".

Both sexes also acknowledged the associated health benefits of ICS, with one women stating: "the ICS lets of less smoke and ash, and so pollutes less. We use the ICS inside the house without any worry about our health or that of our family".

And for many of the women, the benefits associated with their use of ICS have contributed to feelings of enhanced respect and dignity: "If my restaurant business is doing well, it's because of the ICS […Using it] has increased my confidence and that of my clients in me as I'm now able to respond to their needs so much quicker".

But for men, many of the benefits still pertain to women enhanced ability to comply with their expected gendered role

While men do recognise the advantages of women's time saved as a result of ICS, many of the perceived benefits for men relate to women complying more effectively with their stereotyped or 'preferred' role. One man stated that: "Using an ICS means women sweat less, helping women to stay beautiful throughout the day", with another applauding the product because: "When I get back to the house the food has always been ready".

One man also alluded to the potential for women's growing financial independence as a result of time savings in the household, cautioning that women's ability to engage in productive activities should only be used to the benefit of the family: "As long as a woman's capabilities are used for the good of all the family, then there's no risk of violence and she enjoys the rights and trust of her husband. But when women brandish their capabilities and want to use them for her own gain, it's at that point that she exposes herself to violence".

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Men and women expressed varied and sometimes conflicting views on women's roles

More generally, men expressed traditional views of women's preferred behaviours, with one man stating that: "[a strong woman is] someone who fully plays her role, who stands besides her husband as a true help, a woman who responds to the needs of her husband". Another reinforced this view, and stressed that women should feel a level gratitude or debt to her husband: "I expect of a women [that she is] a true help, a support to me, a woman who knows why I married her". And while some women agreed with this view of preferred female behaviours:

"A strong women is one that encourages her husband, and who doesn't let him down, when he finds himself in difficult times" said one, others felt they needed to imitate the behaviours of men to be perceived as strong: "[An empowered woman] is one who has a mind like a man. Who thinks like a man. A strong woman plays with her savings to support the family, and who can bring the same solutions to family issues in the same way as does a man".

CONCLUSIONS

The research revealed women's overwhelmingly positive feelings towards the purchase and use of ICS, and the broader benefits that this has had for their lives. Households have realised significant cost savings, which have been captured – and/or their usage influenced – by women. More transformational still, is the significant reduction in hours spent by women on unpaid care. Collectively, the financial and time savings have helped women to establish or expand existing productive activities, facilitating or strengthening their own income streams. The combined reduction in household responsibilities and engagement in income-generating activities outside of the home contribute to some early signs of women's shifting roles, entailing enhanced mobility, increased financial autonomy and a broadening of women's activities away care-focussed tasks.

This study – in line with ÉLAN RDC's broader WEE Learning Series – resists affirming or denying the realisation of greater empowerment according to international definitions – recognising instead the complexity and contextually-determined nature of this process. Nonetheless, we can conclude that women themselves perceive the changes in their lives to have been primarily positive, having noted feelings of increased respect and dignity, and a lessening of tensions between men and women.

While the research did reveal men's recognition of the benefits of ICS and broad support for the liberation of women's time, traditional views of women's roles were still expressed, and indications of women's enhanced empowerment were welcomed only where is was perceived to support – rather than threaten – the patriarchal order of the household.

In conclusion, the intervention's hypothesis – which posits that by improving the availability, affordability, and quality of ICS, poor women realise net attributable income increase and reductions in unpaid care – does indeed hold true. That said, the research findings also point to opportunities for Halt Bank's current marketing approach to be further refined, and therein realise greater outreach. Currently the sales strategy of Halt Bank focuses on the financial savings and health benefits that can be realised by purchasing the product, with no explicit acknowledgement of its time-saving properties and the implications of this for women's care burden. By promoting the 4-5 hour daily time savings, alongside the other advertised benefits, Halt Bank can more powerfully market ICS to poor women.

Programme & Policy Recommendations

- **Support Halt Bank and other ICS distributors to reorient sales strategy to explicitly target female consumers, recognising their greater levels of purchasing power than those previously acknowledged.**
- **Support Halt Bank and other ICS distributors to reframe their marketing strategies to become more women-oriented by explicitly promoting benefits other than financial savings, in particular, the time savings realised through the use of ICS, the consequent impact of women's unpaid care burden, and the additional health benefits.**
- **Purposively acknowledge social norms – both as a potential barrier to and catalyst for – empowerment within future intervention designs.**

Annex: Abridged research plan and methodological considerations[4]

Research questions	In line with the case study objectives, the research questions were aimed at attaining a nuanced picture of the intended and unintended outcomes associated with women's use of ICS: ▲ Has the use of ICS led to financial savings? Is this through a reduced expenditure on charcoal, the reallocation of time away from unpaid care and towards productive activities, or both? Who has this benefited mostly within the household? Do women capture the financial savings? If not, are they able to influence its usage? ▲ What other advantages or disadvantages have been reported by users? Have health benefits been observed? A reduction in household responsibilities? Have these benefited / disadvantaged particular individuals within the household more than others (for example, women?) ▲ Have women had, and seized, the opportunity to adopt new and improved roles within – and outside of – the household as a result of the benefits associated with ICS? ▲ Do women spend more time away from the home? Where? Why? What does this mean for the women? For men? For the household? How do women (and men) feel about this? NOTE: These questions were not used directly, rather more subtle, indirect probes, often drawing on proxies or hypothetical scenarios, were developed and included in Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interview guides to capture responses to the above research questions. These were used in a semi-structured manner, to allow for exploration of unanticipated outcomes.
Research methodology	The research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the individual experiences of women and men who have purchased and are using an ICS from Halt Bank, during the period that ÉLAN RDC has been supporting the company to improve business performance, with the parallel aim of increasing poor people's access to a cheap, healthy and time-saving technology. In certain instances the case study draws on quantitative data captured by the programme's Monitoring and Results Measurement (MRM) systems to complement the qualitative research undertaken.
Research methods, data collection tools, sample size and selection	The case study used two research methods and associated data collection tools: ▲ Focus group discussions (FGDs): A total of two FGDs were undertaken with 10 women and men separately, all from households which had purchased an ICS from Halt Bank in the last year. ▲ Key Informant Interview (KII): A KII was conducted with the Managing Director of Halt Bank to understand the market actor's perception of gender-responsive business models and to comprehend the attractiveness and viability of maintaining such practices post-ÉLAN RDC's support. The FGD participants had the following characteristics: ▲ The women were between the ages of 21 and 52, and all came from households that had purchased an ICS from Halt Bank over the last 12 months. The majority of women were educated to primary level, with 3 having progressed to further education. On average they had married at 19 years of age. Within the group, two women headed the household (both were widows). ▲ The second group comprised 10 men between the ages of 18 and 64, and all came from households that had purchased an ICS from Halt Bank over the last 12 months. Three quarters of the male participants were educated to a level above primary, and on average were married aged 27. Within the group, all men were married, and one had recently remarried for the second time following the death of his first wife. In both the female and male groups, the average family size was just over 6 people. For both, the FGDs and the KII semi-structured guides were developed, using non-leading probes to facilitate conversation. The data was collected in the course of a single day in September 2016.

4 This abridged version is based on a detailed research methodology developed ahead of the research.

Data analysis approach	▲ International theories and evidence of WEE and knowledge of intervention informed the FGD and KII guides. ▲ Discussions were recorded, transcribed and translated from Swahili into French. ▲ Trends, commonalities and differences were analysed and written up.
Potential for response bias	▲ While some development initiatives are active in Lubumbashi, none of the participants had ever been involved in development research so survey fatigue is not a concern. ▲ However, as response bias and group think was conceivable, the following steps to mitigate this risk were taken: - Avoiding structured enquiry techniques and leading questions; - Clearly communicating to participants before the FGD that their involvement in the research and the responses given will in no way influence the credit relationship with Halt Bank (for those still paying off the ICS) - Ensuring no clear incentive for participation was advertised prior to the FGD (a $5 stipend for transport was paid at end of discussion).
Ethical considerations	▲ Separate FGDs for men and women were undertaken; these were facilitated by a male and female Congolese facilitator respectively. ▲ Facilitators trained in gender-sensitive research practices. ▲ Participants were assured of their confidentiality by omitting names in the case study write-up to minimise risk of identification and/ any potential of reprisal. ▲ Informed consent was taken for the use of data, photographs or videos. ▲ Given the potential for sensitive topics to be raised in discussion, e.g. gender-based violence; we ensured that women feel they are in a safe space and that no outsiders could hear the discussion.
Methodological learning and reflections	▲ Transcriptions did not record the names of individual participants, meaning that it was not possible to provide greater social analysis to the responses given in this particular case study. In the subsequent studies, social characteristics will be incorporated (while retaining anonymity) to provide richer data findings, which provides nuance, for example, on intergenerational differences.