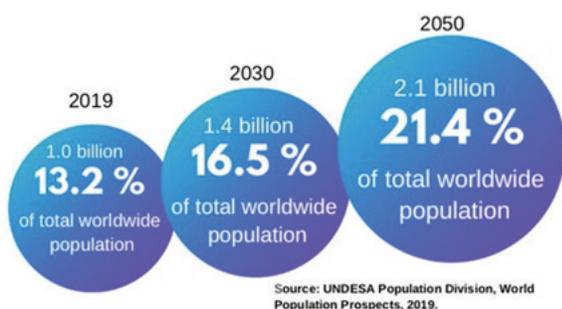


The UN & You

BY TERESA KOTTURAN SCN – OCTOBER 2020

The World of Ageing



The world's population is ageing — every country is experiencing it. The ageing of the population is going to impact all aspects of society: education, housing, health, long term-term-care, social protection, transport, information and communication as well as family structures and intergenerational ties. Older persons are increasingly seen as contributors to development, and their abilities to contribute to the betterment of societies should be integrated into policies and programs at all levels.

We also have a responsibility to raise awareness on the challenges and opportunities of global ageing. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that older persons have become one of its more visible victims. Available evidence indicates that older persons are at higher risk of serious illness and death. The pandemic has also shown light on the vulnerabilities older persons face: neglect and abuse in institutions, homes, refugee camps, prisons; lack of personal protective equipment in care homes; increase in poverty and employment, increasing trauma of stigma and discrimination; limited access to water and sanitation, and basic services. The virus is also threatening their social networks, their access to health services, their jobs and pensions. Those who receive care at home are subject to prolonged periods of isolation, which impacts their mental well-being.

Human Rights of Older Persons

Older persons, unlike women, children and persons with disabilities, migrants or refugees, are not protected by a specific human rights instrument, which leads to a lack of attention on the challenges older men and women face in the global policy framework, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Rights of older persons are embedded in international human rights conventions on economic, social and political rights. Rights of older persons do not change as they grow older. While older persons enjoy the same universal human rights as everyone else, some rights are more relevant to older persons:

- Right to freedom from discrimination
- Right to freedom from violence
- Right to social security
- Right to health
- Right to work
- Right to property and inheritance

The UN Secretary-General's Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons highlights the untold fear and suffering for older persons across the world caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has revealed important gaps in the availability of age-specific data; lack of legal frameworks at national and international levels to protect the human rights of older persons.

Older persons experiencing forced displacement due to conflict or climate conditions are facing heightened risk of violence, exploitation and abuse, as well as barriers to gaining humanitarian assistance and basic services. We need to ask: What are the legal, ethical and social implications of ageing, and what kind of international legal framework is required to advance the human rights and health of older persons?

Digital Inclusion of Older Persons

During the pandemic the internet and digital technologies have become a window to the world and the channel to connect with family, friends and the com-

munity as well as a means to work from home and online education. Yet, many older persons have limited access to technology. Available data shows that one-third of adults 65 or older in the United States have never used the Internet, while in the UK more than half of the people who have never used the Internet are aged 75 years and over. The digital gap affects the ability of older persons to make use of services to protect and maintain their health and improve their lives. Though technology is connecting people — within families, between caregivers and across generations — millions of older persons in developing countries are left behind.

Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020-2030

The “[Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020–2030](#)” is an initiative of the World Health Organization promoted by the United Nations during the 30th anniversary of the International Day of Older Persons on Oct. 1. Longevity is a testament to the collective actions taken in the past decades to improve the lives of people in the socio-economic and health fronts. Most of the people aged 60 years or older are living in low- and middle-income countries. Many do not have access to even the basic services necessary for a life of meaning and dignity. By 2050, 1 in 6 people in the world will be over the age of 65, up from 1 in 11 in 2019. Coordinated action on healthy ageing is urgently needed, for we are witnessing a longevity revolution. Some countries are in its early stages, and some are more advanced.

What is healthy ageing? “Healthy ageing is the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age. Functional ability is about having the capabilities that enable all people to be and do what they have reason to value.” The “Decade of Healthy Ageing” is an opportunity to have “older people at the center of the plan, while bringing together governments, civil society, international agencies, professionals, academia, media, and the private sector for 10 years of concerted, catalytic and collaborative action to improve the lives of older people, their families and communities in which they live.”

Healthy ageing is relevant to everyone, not just those who are free of disease. The availability and accessibility of socio-economic and cultural resources to people throughout their lives — education, health,

employment and earning — influence their power to make healthy choices, contribute and receive support when they need it. Though the needs of the ageing are predictable, many countries are not prepared to meet them. Older people in general cannot access the basic resources necessary for a life of meaning and dignity. Many face barriers that prevent them from experiencing health and well-being and fully participating in society. The existing socio-economic inequalities are the main reason for this. Its impact can be offset by social protection measures — but only 45 percent of people around the world receive some form of social protection.

The vision of the “Decade” is a world in which all people can live long, healthy lives. It is based on the World Health Organization’s [Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health \(2016–2030\)](#) and the [World report on ageing and health \(2015\)](#). The “Decade” is built on the [Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#).

The focus of the “Decade” is on the second half of life, but actions to ensure healthy ageing should be taken at all ages — a life-course approach. It embraces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#), which pledges to leave no one behind, and the [WHO Global Campaign to Combat Ageism](#) as guiding principles for implementation. If all countries commit themselves to implement the 2030 Agenda, a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, healthy ageing can become a reality. Fifteen of the 17 SDGs impact the lives of older persons and can help to adopt a life-course approach.

The “Decade” demands that governments make investments to foster healthy ageing, including integrated health and social care and age-friendly environments, better health and nutrition, skills and knowledge, social connectivity, personal and financial security and personal dignity. It calls for technological, scientific, medial and assistive technologies and digital innovations to foster healthy ageing. It requires the engagements of civil society groups, communities and the private sector in policy making, program design and delivery, especially for marginalized, excluded and vulnerable groups. Above all, there has to be transparency and accountability.

Areas of action

- **Change how we think, feel and act towards age and ageing.** Stereotyping (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we

Table 1. Guiding principles for the *Decade of Healthy Ageing*

Interconnected and indivisible	All implementing stakeholders address all the Sustainable Development Goals together instead of a list of goals from which they pick and choose.
Inclusive	Involves all segments of society, irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, ability, location or other social category.
Multistakeholder partnerships	Multistakeholder partnerships are mobilized to share knowledge, expertise, technology and resources.
Universal	Commits all countries, irrespective of income level and development status, to comprehensive work for sustainable development, adapted to each context and population, as necessary.
Leaving no one behind	Applies to all people, whoever and wherever they are, targeting their specific challenges and vulnerability.
Equity	Champions equal, just opportunities to enjoy the determinants and enablers of healthy ageing, including social and economic status, age, gender, place of birth or residence, migrant status and level of ability. This may sometimes require unequal attention to some population groups to ensure the greatest benefit to the least advantaged, most vulnerable or marginalized members of society.
Intergenerational solidarity	Enables social cohesion and interactive exchange among generations to support health and well-being for all people.
Commitment	Sustains work over the 10 years and into the longer term.
Do no harm	Commits countries to protect the well-being of all stakeholders and minimize any foreseeable harm to other age groups.

act) towards people on the basis of their age — ageism — affects people of all ages but has negative effects on the health and well-being of older people. Ageism imposes barriers in policies and programs in all sectors such as education, labor, health and social care and pensions. It influences the way problems are framed, questions are asked and solutions are offered. Ageism truly marginalizes older people within their communities and reduces their access to all kinds of services. Challenging stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination must be integral to all areas of action. If not, older persons will remain invisible figuratively and in policy making.

- **Ensure that communities foster the abilities of older people.** Physical, social and economic environments, both rural and urban, are important determinants of healthy ageing. There is a need to create age-friendly environments in which to grow, live, work, play and age by removing physical and social barriers and implementing important policies, systems, products and technologies to promote physical and mental health capacity.

- **Deliver person-centered integrated care and primary health services responsive to older people.** Older people require non-discriminatory access to good-quality health services. Strengthening primary health care is a must to deliver accessible, affordable, equitable, safe, community-based care for older people. Integral to these activities will be recognition of equity, social justice and social protection as well as the elimination of ageism.
- **Provide access to long-term care for older people who need it.** Significant declines in physical and mental capacity can limit older people's ability to care for themselves and to participate in society. Current approaches to providing long-term care rely heavily on informal care in the family, who often lack the necessary training, support, resources and social protection. So, every country should have a system to meet the needs of older people for long-term care, including social care and support that helps them with daily living and access to community services and participation in activities.

History of Policies and Actions on Ageing at the UN

1. **1982** — The Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing is the first international instrument on ageing. Its aim was to strengthen the capacities of governments and civil society to deal with the ageing populations and to address the developmental potential and dependency needs of older persons. This plan had 62 recommendations for actions on research, data collection and analysis, training and education as well as: health and nutrition, protection of elderly consumers, housing and environment, family, social welfare, income security and employment and education.
2. **1990** — UN declares October 1 as International Day for the Elderly.
3. **1991** — Formulates the human rights-based UN Principles for Older Persons. Launches a global information campaign on the action program on ageing for 1992 and beyond.
4. **1992** — Proclamation on Ageing since the unprecedented ageing populations taking place throughout the world.
5. **2002** — “Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing” — the outcome of the second World Assembly on Ageing. Countries commit to incorporate ageing within their social and economic strategies, policies and actions. Life expectancy at birth increased 20 years since 1950, and number of persons over 60 years will increase from 600 million in 2000 to almost 2 billion by 2050. It means, the old and the young representing an equal share of the world’s population. It is a major issue for all countries, especially for developing countries.
6. The Commission for Social Development (CSocD) was tasked with integrating the different dimensions of population ageing in its work and modalities for the review and appraisal of the follow-up to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. How the declaration has helped to improve the quality of life of older persons is reviewed annually during the Commission for Social Development. CSocD59 invited member states and UN agencies to take concrete measures to mainstream ageing issues, including the views of older persons into their programs.

Partnerships for Change

The “Decade of Healthy Ageing” requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response. Governments will have to embrace a different way of “doing business.” It is important to listen to diverse voices: meaningful engagement of older people, family members, caregivers, young people and communities to influence policies, creation of communities and systems to foster healthy ageing. A lack of data on healthy ageing in 75 percent of countries keeps older persons invisible and excluded from policies and services.

Age disaggregated and gender-sensitive data and research are needed to address current needs of older people, anticipate future needs, assess gaps in services, etc., to foster transformation.

Indicators of Progress in Healthy Ageing

Countries are to appoint a national focal point on ageing and health in the ministry of health and submit reports on: national plan on ageing and health; national multi-stakeholder forum; national legislation and enforcement strategies against discrimination by age; national regulations or legislation on access to assistive devices; national program to foster age-friendly

environments; national policy to support comprehensive assessments of older people and a national policy on long-term care, etc. *[Editor’s note: This section was summarized from “The Decade of Healthy Ageing” document]*

Resources/Links

[The Decade of Healthy Ageing \(PDF\)](#)

[Policy Brief: Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons \(PDF\)](#)

[Conversation – AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins and UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres \(Video\)](#)

[Ageing, Older Persons and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)