



Statement of the Stakeholder Group on Ageing
for the General Debate of the 2020 High-level Political Forum/
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***Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action
and delivery for sustainable development***

When opening the United Nations International Day of Older Persons almost 20 years ago, Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, shared the African Proverb: “When an elder dies, a library is burned and vast sums of wisdom and knowledge are lost.” This proverb clearly recognizes the contribution elders make to their society. More recently, Elizabeth Kapu'uwailani Lindsey, the first Polynesian explorer and the first female Fellow of the National Geographic Society in reference to that same proverb added: “Throughout the world libraries are ablaze with scant attention.”

Scant attention indeed to older persons, who are now usually listed under “vulnerable groups” and not also considered as active contributors to their families, communities and to the economy.

Older persons are now generally seen as frail, of no consequence, of no value, dependent, a liability for their families and a burden on society. While some older persons are indeed in need of assistance and care, many others are vibrant, healthy, active, and independent, providing care-giving, acting as mentors, educators, entrepreneurs, some with second careers, active contributors to their families, their communities and to the economy. The lack of attention given by Governments to people over the age of 65, in terms of their heterogeneity, and in terms of legislation, policies and programmes, reflects the invisibility of the largest growing demographic group.

The Stakeholder Group on Aging (SGA) is fervently committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and believes they can be more quickly achieved with the recognition and inclusion of older persons, as part of the overall efforts to leave no one behind.

Population ageing has been recognized as one of the four global demographic megatrends – population growth, population ageing, international migration and urbanization – with continued and lasting impacts on sustainable development. In 2019, there were 703 million people over the age of 65, representing 9% of the total worldwide population; by 2030 it is projected that there will be 1 billion, representing 12% of the total worldwide population, and by 2050, there will be 1.5 billion people over the age of 65, representing 16% of the total worldwide population. (United Nations “World Population Prospects, 2019”).

Governments cannot afford to ignore these demographic trends which have huge implications for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. And yet, we find that older persons continue to be marginalized, without adequate health services and social protection. Many suffer from ageism and age discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect. What sort of a world will the youth of today face when they too start to get older?

COVID-19

The global pandemic has made it clear that we are all connected. It has also undeniably exacerbated the inequalities currently faced by those already left behind. The increased vulnerabilities of the poor, minorities, people with multiple morbidities, those with disabilities and older persons are stark indicators of the social determinants of COVID-19. As reported in the May 2020 UN Policy Brief on The Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons, older persons are more likely to get and die of COVID-19; are too often being denied COVID-19 care and other health care; are disproportionately vulnerable and suffering from neglect both in care homes and private residences; and are experiencing social isolation as a result of mandated/recommended physical distancing measures which are negatively affecting their mental and physical health.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affects older persons and those with underlying health conditions, highlights the importance of multifaceted cooperation and the urgent need for a whole-of-society and life-course approach to delivering well-resourced health systems that respond to all ages. The launching of the World Health Organization Decade of Healthy Ageing (2020-2030) is an opportunity to fully recognize that the world is ageing and to ensure that everyone can live a longer and healthier life. A healthy economy requires healthy people of every age.

Social Determinants of Health

It is increasingly recognized that health is neither monolithic nor singular in causality but rather is influenced in fundamental ways by multiple factors. Social, economic and physical conditions have critical impacts on people in terms of the places where they are born, live, and work. There is now accumulating and undeniable scientific evidence that resources available to people within these contexts influence their quality of life which, in turn, influence population health outcomes. Critically important are safe and affordable housing, access to education, public safety, availability of healthy foods and local emergency/health services, and environments free of life-threatening toxins. The intersectionality of these issues must be addressed by policies that take a life-course approach.

Accumulating evidence indicates that people who both cross-sectionally (i.e. at any one point in time) and longitudinally (i.e. over time) experience fewer illnesses are those with greater productivity and are less in need of public services and resources. For example, healthy children are better students, with fewer special needs and are more likely to become productive adults. More socially connected and more

healthy older persons are less likely to develop dementia and are, thereby, less likely to need expensive medical services or care.

Linked Lives and life-course approach

Social scientists have shown that lives are linked in many ways. What aids or disadvantages one person tends to aid or disadvantage others with whom the individual is connected. Ample evidence shows the benefits of an intergenerational life-course approach to policies and programmes. For example, grandparents with a pension share the benefits of that pension with the whole family, in terms of contribution to food, education, care-giving and other family needs. On the other hand, when one person becomes unemployed the entire family is often impoverished, e.g. family nutrition suffers, opportunities are lost, education is interrupted.

The SGA supports the recommendation contained in the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 that social protection, including pensions and support for older persons and persons with disabilities, should not be limited to those who spent their working years in formal, full-time jobs, but should also include those working in the informal sector. The SGA strongly supports non-contributory, tax-financed social pensions and the urgent roll-out of social protection floors.

Life-long learning, formal and informal, enables economic and social empowerment, autonomy and independence. Education and training in later life have numerous positive effects – better understanding of health issues, more effective support for the family (educational, financial, social), stronger resilience to man-made and natural disasters, civic engagement. Knowledge and skills throughout the life-course can make a significant difference to ending poverty.

Member States must also adopt measures to prepare for an ageing population that will increasingly live in an urban environment. Accessibility for all, regardless of age or ability, while adhering to the principle of universal design, should be a priority in all infrastructure planning.

Age-inclusive policies based on the international framework of human rights and intergenerational cohesion based on intersections of age, gender and disability, among other aspects, will deliver income security, the best possible health, decent housing, food security, safety and the enjoyment of rights throughout people's lives.

The SDGs will be best and more quickly achieved by taking a linked lives and life-course approach to interventions, policies and programs.

Gender Specific Issues

By 2050, women will comprise 54 per cent of the global population aged 65 years and over, and 59 per cent of the total population aged 80 years and over. Women experience greater economic hardship as they age, owing to a lifetime of gender-based discrimination, in particular in terms of education and employment, ending up with few savings and assets. They are also denied rights owing to the intersection of ageism, widowhood, disability, invisibility and negative attitudes about their value and capabilities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, women are experiencing more domestic, sexual and gender-based violence; they, including older women, represent 70% of front-line health care workers globally; and are particularly threatened economically. All actions taken to deal with COVID-19 pandemic must be gender responsive.

The achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, including older women, is essential to ensure implementation of the SDGs.

Moving Forward with Accelerated action and transformative pathways

The Secretary-General's progress report (E/2020/57) tells us implementation of the SDGs has been uneven and significant improvement is required. The pace of global poverty reduction was decelerating and it was projected that the global target of ending poverty by 2030 would be missed. The report also tells us that while the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need to strengthen social protection and emergency preparedness and response, those measures alone are insufficient to safeguard the poor and the vulnerable, who most need them. International solidarity and cooperation is needed more than ever.

The Decade of Healthy Ageing (2020-2030) offers another opportunity to move forward with fundamental changes that will accelerate action and create transformative pathways to achieve the SDGs. As the Secretary-General has pointed out, if we are to build back better, we must ensure appropriate "care, support and opportunity across the life cycle, including by investing in universal health coverage, in social protection and by strengthening the national and international legal framework to protect the human rights of all people, at all ages."

The SGA proposes the following :

- Action by Governments to include a life-course approach to legislation, policies and programmes when implementing the SDGs.
- Full recognition of the human rights of older persons, including consideration of an international convention to protect and promote their human rights.

In sum, we are at a unique place in history and have the opportunity, borne of great pain and suffering, to greatly advance not only the Sustainable Development Goals, but also our civilization.

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