

The Journey to Age Equality

International Day of Older Persons at the United Nations

Good morning everyone. Thank you Maud for the kind introduction; and to all the organizers of this event. It's a pleasure to be with you today to celebrate the International Day of Older Persons at the United Nations, and to recognize many friends and colleagues in the room.

I'd like to do four things in the time that I have:

First, put some basic facts about ageing on the table, to set the scene for the discussion.

Second, place this seismic demographic shift of ageing within the context of other trends that the world is experiencing: on inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation, and technology.

Third, ask how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development addresses ageing, and how it can help.

And lastly, propose seven steps – seven actions – on the journey to age equality. What are seven things we could usefully do together to ensure that all older persons can live in dignity, where their skills and experience are rewarded, and where they are treated equally and without discrimination.

Some facts – for which I have to thank the excellent work of colleagues in UN DESA's Population Division.

The world is undergoing nothing less than a demographic revolution. We continue to put more people on the planet. Somewhere in the range of 9.4 to 12.7 billion people by the end of this century. And already we know that this population is getting older.

- In 2018, for the first time, the number of people older than 65 outnumbered children under the age of 5.
- From today until 2050 the proportion of the population aged 65 or over is expected to more than double.

By 2030, the deadline of the Agenda that governments agreed to here in New York in 2015, the share of older persons is expected to grow in all regions.

- Putting the dividing line at age 65 is going to become increasingly irrelevant. The number of people over the age of 80 is growing as life expectancy stretches. There were 125 million of the 'oldest old' at the start of the SDGs ... there will be over 200 million by 2030, and over 430 million by 2050.

Lastly, there is a strong gender perspective to this ageing, because women tend to live longer:

- In 2019, women make up 55% of people aged 65 years or over; and 61% of those aged 80 and over.

Ageing is probably the most important demographic shift we are experiencing, but it's not the only one: We also have shifting patterns of fertility, greater numbers of people migrating to other countries, and more people living in cities.

In 2017 there were an estimated 258 million people living in a country different from the one in which they were born, and within thirty years, two-thirds of us will live in cities.

These demographic shifts are not the only global mega-trends shaping the prospects of a sustainable world and decent lives for all.

Let me cover climate change and technology briefly, and then inequalities in a bit more depth. These shifts bring challenges for older persons in and of themselves, but we also have to think about how they interact with each other.

On climate change: The impacts we've already locked in through past and current emissions leave older persons tragically more exposed.

It is a well-reported fact that the heatwaves in Europe this century from successively hot summers have disproportionately killed older people.

We have more granular figures on hurricanes in the United States. As Professor Deborah Carr from Boston University has found, while older people make up 12% of the overall population in the US, they made up two-thirds of the estimated 1800 people who died in Hurricane Katrina; and more than half of those who were killed by Hurricane Sandy.

Those are heatwaves in Europe and hurricanes in the US. Powerful countries with lots of assets. But what about the countries where we have weaker evidence or no evidence at all? Where older people may be less visible?

On technology, no one can know with any certainty how fast these frontiers will evolve. There should be tremendous scope for strengthening the inclusion of and improving the life experience of older people: through new health technologies, access to life-long learning opportunities, access to forms of continued employment, and cleaner environments. But this will depend critically on whether older people can afford and access these technologies. Perhaps more importantly, it will depend on whether older persons are involved in the process of innovation itself, so that new technologies reflect their priorities.

Both of these examples on climate and technology resonate with a broader point about inequalities.

There are different types of inequality. Inequalities related to money: inequalities in income and inequalities in wealth. But also what are called horizontal inequalities, including those that may arise because of characteristics of gender, ethnicity, disability or age, or combinations thereof. I want to say a few words about each of those, and then on the relationship between inequalities now and future ageing.

First, on money inequalities:

It's a somewhat mixed and complicated picture, but in the end not very positive.

Economists talk about inequality 'between countries', and inequality 'within countries'. Some countries in the Global South – developing countries – are growing faster than industrialized countries. They are catching up, and that is placing a downward pressure on inequality between countries.

There are some outliers – mostly countries in conflict or facing insecurity, but overall the world is moving closer together on the narrow measure of income.

But when we look at within country inequality we see a different picture:

- In the last 30 years, inequality has risen in most advanced industrial countries.
- In many Latin American and Caribbean countries, it's actually fallen a bit ... but it was already very high (Gini index over 50).
- In low and middle income countries, some have risen and some have fallen. But in the most populous – China, India and Indonesia – they have all risen. And not inconsiderably.
- As a whole, this means that when we weight by population – (because inequality has also risen in the United States) – the global Gini measure has risen from 36.7 to 40.8.

All of these calculations are based on household surveys. But these typically miss the incomes of the very richest, the elites, the 1% or even the 0.1%. And there is growing evidence that the incomes and wealth of these super-rich people have been growing much much faster. The latest iteration of Oxfam's inequality headline is that 26 people in the world – all men – own as much as the poorest 50%.

At the same time, in many high and middle income countries real wages for many at the bottom of the distribution have stayed flat, and pensions have become less generous. There has been a downward pressure on tax receipts – in part because a lot of all that wealth has been squirreled overseas to tax havens. And that has placed pressure on services and infrastructure in many countries, rich and poor.

Now of course you can be old and very wealthy. But for the general population, the erosion of pensions and services is a strong contributory factor to old age poverty.

Beyond money, inequality, like poverty, has many dimensions.

There can be inequality in accessing services, inequality in political voice, inequalities because of discrimination or disrespect. And inequalities that exist purely because of someone's characteristics: their gender, age, ethnicity, their physical and mental health, marital status, sexuality, whether they have moved or been displaced to a different country.

And these inequalities can overlap and reinforce. So if you are an older woman, with your family in another country, with fragile health you face potentially multiple inequalities.

Lastly, just a few words on ageing and inequalities taken together.

What will ageing look like in the future because of inequalities today?

In short, more unequal societies now are going to lead to more unequal ageing processes. That is because inequalities and relative disadvantage compound over time, over the course of a life. A child starting her life in an unequal society, with patchy education and poor health, is less likely to find decent employment, less like to save – through her pension or otherwise – and will face greater challenges in older age.

In short, there will be a wider gap in the experience of ageing because of inequalities today.

With that complexity, with that set of overlapping macro challenges, and overlapping inequalities, what does the 2030 Agenda bring? How can it be used to improve the lives of all groups, including older persons?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed by UN Member States in September 2015. It seeks to support a transition to sustainable development in all its dimensions, including through setting 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets covering aspects of economic, social and environmental sustainability.

A long and extensive consultative process informed the content of the 2030 Agenda. National level consultations were complemented by surveys and thematic consultations – including on governance, inequalities, and demographic change.

Many people in this room contributed evidence, perspectives, case studies and lobbied for the explicit inclusion of older people. The NGO Committee on Ageing, the Stakeholder Group on Ageing, and many individual NGOs played a key role. They formed coalitions with groups focused on disabilities, on youth, and on gender.

The 2030 Agenda is broad and ambitious. The targets are designed to make people think about how things are inter-connected in the real world, which I think is helpful to

support action for older persons because real challenges in real lives can be captured more accurately – for example, the links between employment and social protection, between environment and health, and between cities and access to essential services.

The Agenda is universal, covering all countries. But there is a further interpretation of universality that is even more relevant to discussions on ageing and older persons. That is, governments have committed to leaving no one behind, and to try to reach the furthest away first. This means at the very least that progress on the goals needs to be realized for all people regardless of their age or other characteristics.

This commitment to leaving no one behind, together with other commitments in the preamble, means the agenda is more explicitly aligned with human rights, and therefore reflects the existing human rights declarations for children, disabled persons, indigenous peoples, and LGBT persons.

Older persons are in the Agenda. Many of the targets are extremely relevant for older persons: on poverty, social protection, health, life-long learning, gender, employment, and cities. But the slant of that inclusion is still about protection, and about older persons being vulnerable and needing additional support, and less about older persons being strong agents for sustainable development. About the contributions that older persons can and must make.

And as many have pointed out, there is no specific human rights instrument for older persons. I would posit that, if there was, the commitments on ageing and older persons in the 2030 Agenda would have been even stronger.

The question then becomes: How can we bring this together in an agenda that will carry us successfully on this journey to dignity and age equality?

Let me finish with seven actions, all familiar to you already, but taken together I believe we could shift the dial on ageing.

One. **We have to radically change our perspective.** Old age is everyone's future, it's not to be ignored or feared. Older people are not just another group in the long comma'd list of the vulnerable, who therefore insist on extra protection and help. It needs to be flipped around: older people bring skills, experience and wisdom that can help to make better-informed decisions, stay calm in the face of turmoil and confrontation, and who

can show patience, compassion and empathy. They are not a drain on resources that could be spent elsewhere. Their inclusion – economically, socially, politically, and in safeguarding nature – pays back. It's to everyone's benefit.

Two. **A life-course approach.** We need to comprehensively and consistently adopt a life-course approach for all policy issues, but I would say especially in terms of nutrition, health and education. As Ashton Applewhite told us in this building in July, we are either old or future old. The support we get in youth and middle-age prepares us for longer, healthier, higher-quality, and enjoyable lives.

Three. **Infrastructure and services.** We need to invest more in age-friendly infrastructure and provide services that enable older persons to participate and contribute: in our offices and other places of work, in our transport systems, in housing, in life-long learning.

Four. **Organizations and institutions.** We need better age-diversity in structures where decisions are made and resources allocated. In parliaments, governments, civil services, businesses big and small, NGOs, community organizations – so that older people's voices are heard, their opinions and needs are reflected, and better quality management is exercised.

Five. **Consign age discrimination to the dustbin.** This is a long process; a hard-fought cultural change. But we can underpin it by concretizing the rights of older people in national and multilateral legal commitments. Just as we have done for children, for migrants, and for people living with disabilities. Governments should expand their capacities to analyze and respond to a stronger agenda for older people. Given the seismic demographic shift faced eventually by all countries, we should also consider capacity and leadership at the multilateral level: perhaps now is the time for a distinct UN office on ageing with the capacity for policy analysis, legal advice, and advocacy.

Six. **Older women.** We need to pay extra attention and dedicate more resources to the needs of older women as they make up the majority of older persons, especially the older old, and face additional overlapping challenges and constraints, including discrimination and violence.

Seven. **Data and research.** And I say this coming from a research Institute. We don't have very much information on the wellbeing of older persons, especially in parts of the world with fewer resources and less capacity. Many of the data collection instruments we rely on – household surveys – are effectively age-blind. We need to remove the age caps that exist in these instruments, and I would encourage all governments to support

and participate in the Titchfield City Group on Ageing, which will be working until 2023 to assess gaps and make a recommendation for the collection of ageing-related data.

Linked to this, research. Obviously we need standard continuing research on the wellbeing of older persons, in contemporary situations, in different parts of the world. But we also need future-oriented research on how the lives of older people will change in the next century because of our rapidly changing world: the environment, technology, changing patterns of inequality, and the shifting economic and political gravity between the global north and global south.

Those seven actions are easier said than done.

It will take time and effort and persuasion and advocacy ...

But in the end the world will listen – largely because the world itself will be older, with more experience and skills and wisdom that can help progress this agenda.

Thank you.