

Ageing and ‘The Decade of Action’ to deliver on the SDGs

Input to the Expert Group Meeting on ‘Building forward better for older persons Post COVID-19’

2-5 March 2021, UN DESA, United Nations Secretariat, New York

*Pytrik Dieuwke Oosterhof, Sustainable Development Consultant
O-Land Consulting*

COVID-19 has wide-ranging socio-economic effects such as increasing poverty, aggravating inequalities and stifling economic growth across the world. Among the major impacts of COVID-19 is the disproportionate affect on older persons. Evidence indicates that older persons and those with underlying medical conditions are at a higher risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19. In addition to the health risks, age-based discrimination, inequalities as well as rights violations of older persons have been exacerbated by the pandemic.¹ As countries are moving into the recovery phase, experts predict future pandemics could occur more often and have potentially greater impacts than COVID-19.² At the same time, the global number of older persons is projected to more than double, reaching over 1.5 billion persons in 2050. As these prospects are likely to have far reaching consequences for society, now is a critical time to build a response that considers lessons learned in planning for the future.

The SDGs and COVID-19

Planning for a post-COVID reality provides momentum for prioritizing ageing and older persons. While ageing can be considered a triumph of development, projections suggest there are a number of consequences of a social and economic nature: including increased fiscal pressure, challenging social security and social protection systems, labour markets, as well as family and intergenerational relations. Nevertheless, the topic of ageing still suffers from a lack of attention and resources. And, despite their many significant contributions to society, older persons are often overlooked and their needs and rights are at risk of being left unaddressed. This has been further exposed by COVID-19, which calls for the scaling up of efforts and embracing the potential of ageing and older persons in the concept of ‘building back better’.

As a principle framework to ‘build back better’, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development³ seeks to transition towards sustainable societies for all and to address the multidimensional global trends that we face. Together with a rapid ageing population, climate change, urbanization and digitalization require countries to adapt and change gears in their approach. The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a shared vision and a transformative plan for change. The Agenda sets ambitious goals and lays down a concrete call to action for people, planet and prosperity. However, the SDG Summit in 2019 called progress on the SDGs insufficient, particularly when it comes to ending hunger, achieving food security, and improved nutrition (SDG 2), climate action (SDG 13), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).⁴ COVID-19 has further undermined progress on the SDGs, necessitating a call for accelerated action on the SDGs. By stepping up SDG action, countries will not only be better placed to

¹ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), Policy Brief No. 68, ‘COVID-19 and Older Persons: A Defining Moment for an Informed, Inclusive and Targeted Response’, United Nations, New York, USA

² IPBES (2020) Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Daszak, P., das Neves, C., Amuasi, J., Hayman, D., Kuiken, T., Roche, B., Zambrana-Torrel, C., Buss, P., Dundarova, H., Feferholtz, Y., Foldvari, G., Igbinosa, E., Junglen, S., Liu, Q., Suzan, G., Uhart, M., Wannous, C., Woolaston, K., Mosig Reidl, P., O’Brien, K., Pascual, U., Stoett, P., Li, H., Ngo, H. T., IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany, DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4147317

³ United Nations, (2015), ‘Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’

⁴ United Nations, (2019). ‘Report of the Secretary General on SDG progress 2019 – Special Edition’

recover from the impacts of COVID-19⁵, but also build back more equitable, just and resilient societies. The Decade of Action⁶ to deliver on the SDGs calls for stepping up sustainable solutions and provides momentum for ageing concerns to be addressed.

Ageing, older persons and the 2030 Agenda

A number of SDGs have direct significance for ageing and older persons. These include; poverty eradication (Goal 1); good health (Goal 3); lifelong learning (Goal 4); gender equality (Goal 5); economic growth and decent work (Goal 8); reduced inequality (Goal 10); safe and accessible cities (Goal 11); peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16); and partnerships (SDG 17). While older persons are mentioned explicitly in various targets⁷, the broader principles of the Agenda are also relevant for ageing. The Agenda is transformative and aspires to realize the human rights of all people, including older persons. It calls for 'leaving no one behind' (LNOB) and for ensuring that the SDGs are met for all segments of society, at all ages. In addition, the Agenda acknowledges interdependencies among multiple sectors and promotes policy coherence, participation and inclusivity. The Agenda's broader principles are of significance for ageing in the following areas:

Transformative change

By building on the interconnected nature of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda aspires to achieve sustainable development in a balanced and integrated manner. It considers SDG synergies and trade-offs and recognizes the importance of multi-stakeholder and partnership collaboration. The Agenda therefore represents a holistic approach to understanding and addressing the problems and opportunities of our future. With the demographic significance of ageing and ageing cutting across multiple SDGs, ageing related priorities should be a key part of the transformative change of the 2030 Agenda.

A rights-based approach

The 2030 Agenda incorporates a wide range of human rights principles and standards throughout its targets. It seeks to address inequalities, redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power and puts the emphasis on participation, autonomy and independence. The Agenda's rights-based approach can help uphold the rights of older persons and help overcome key challenges such as; negative stereotyping, discrimination and ageism.

Leaving no one behind

Another relevant principle of the Agenda is LNOB. Without solely stigmatizing older persons as a vulnerable group, it has long been recognized that older persons – and in particular older women - are at higher risk for exclusion and vulnerability.⁸ Many older persons face challenges related to poverty, violence, abuse and discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, ethnic background, religion, and disability. The principle of LNOB recognizes that the dignity of the individual is fundamental and that the 2030 Agenda is for all people and segments of society. It helps to include ageing and older persons and ensure they are not overlooked in decision-making and policy formulation.

Inclusion and participation of older persons

The Agenda's SDG 16, target 7, calls for ensuring 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels'.⁹ This means that a 'whole-of-society' approach is encouraged to implement

⁵ UN DESA (2020), 'Policy Brief #78: Achieving the SDGs through the COVID-19 response and recovery'.

⁶ The Decade of Action was an outcome of the SDG Summit in 2019 pledging to mobilize financing, enhance national implementation and strengthen institutions to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

⁷ Target 2.2, 11.2, 11.7, 10.2, 17.18

⁸ UNFPA and Help Age International, (2012), 'Ageing in the twenty first century – a celebration and a challenge'

⁹ Indicators to measure progress are: i) Indicator 16.7.1: 'Proportion of positions (by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups) in public institutions (national and local legislators, public services, and judiciary) compared to national

the Agenda. The approach calls for inclusivity and participation, providing a context for recognizing older persons as active agents to thereby help make the reality of older persons visible.

Recommendations to scale up ageing in the ‘Decade of Action’

The significance of the 2030 Agenda for ageing is not new. However, right now is an opportunity to scale up ageing-related efforts and support accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. This will require commitment, investment, awareness, data, as well as the engagement of older persons. In more detail, the following six recommendations can support stepping up ageing-related SDG action:

Firstly, ensuring the political commitment and resources that are needed to prepare for ageing societies that will be sustainable and resilient. Investing in linking the 2030 Agenda with ageing-related priorities; awareness raising and capacity building as well as in mainstreaming ageing across sectors and at all levels of society. At the global level, the Third World Assembly on Ageing should be closely aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

Secondly, carrying out analyses of the impacts of COVID-19 on older persons from an SDG perspective. Drawing on the lessons learnt can help better prepare for future pandemics, disasters or crises, when these are integrated into long-term sustainable recovery plans;

Thirdly, defining global, regional, national and local actions to ‘leave no one behind’ can enable and accelerate progress to achieve the SDGs. A human rights-based approach to policy and program development is recommended to help fulfill the pledge of LNOB;

Fourthly, in line with the principle of LNOB, monitoring efforts should measure progress on the SDGs for older persons. This requires disaggregated data by age, gender, disability and location. Data disaggregation can make the situation and needs of older persons visible. To respond to existing data challenges, data gaps must be addressed to measure the impact of the SDGs for older persons and enable the formulation of evidence-based policies;

Fifthly, governments are strongly encouraged to work closely with stakeholders on the SDGs. As a result, many governments have set up coordination mechanisms and platforms for SDG implementation and the follow-up and review, including the Voluntary National Reviews. These aim to strengthen the engagement of non-governmental stakeholders such as; subnational governments, academia, civil society, the private sector and others. The engagement of older persons and their associations can help foster informed policy formulation that considers the needs, preference and rights of older persons;

Lastly, the development of (multiple-stakeholder) partnerships can play an important role in advancing the SDGs as embodied in SDG 17. Partnerships can serve to complement strengths or core values and pool resources and assets in addressing and solving problems in the field of ageing. For instance, public-private partnerships can support the development of innovative approaches to strengthen and improve data on ageing related trends

distributions’; and ii) Indicator 16.7.2: ‘Proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population groups’.

References

- IPBES (2020) Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Daszak, P., das Neves, C., Amuasi, J., Hayman, D., Kuiken, T., Roche, B., Zambrana-Torrel, C., Buss, P., Dundarova, H., Feferholtz, Y., Foldvari, G., Igbinsola, E., Junglen, S., Liu, Q., Suzan, G., Uhart, M., Wannous, C., Woolaston, K., Mosig Reidl, P., O'Brien, K., Pascual, U., Stoett, P., Li, H., Ngo, H. T., IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany
- United Nations, (2019). 'Report of the Secretary General on SDG progress 2019 – Special Edition', New York, USA
- United Nations, (2015), Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), Policy Brief No. 68, 'COVID-19 and Older Persons: A Defining Moment for an Informed, Inclusive and Targeted Response', United Nations, New York, USA
- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), 'Policy Brief #78: Achieving the SDGs through the COVID-19 response and recovery', New York, USA
- UNFPA and Help Age International, (2012), 'Ageing in the twenty first century – a celebration and a challenge', New York, USA