

SWEDEN



STATEMENT

by

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"Changing age structures of populations and their implications for
development"

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- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

Mr Chairman,

While fully aligning ourselves with the statement made by Germany on behalf of the EU and others, Sweden would like to make the following remarks mainly from the perspective of national experience:

First, I would like to express Sweden's strong support for the ICPD agenda and underline the importance of a continuous, systematic follow-up of the ICDP agenda within the framework of the Commission for Population and Development.

Even if malnutrition, illiteracy and ill health is affecting millions of people, in a global perspective, we now live longer than ever before, we are healthier and better educated.

This is a great success also for international cooperation. The UN and its subsidiary bodies, like the WHO and UNFPA, has played a major role in combating diseases and promoting healthy life styles throughout the world.

When discussing ageing societies it is important to have this in mind. Even if ageing in some respects of course may cause economic concerns for governments it is important to remember that longer life is something we have strived for.

An average Swede now reaches the age of almost 79 for men and 83 years for women - up from 54 and 57 a hundred years ago. This fantastic development owes a lot to the modern welfare system, including, in Sweden, determined efforts to bolster gender empowerment and reproductive health. Yet I fear we have lost some important aspects along the way.

I have learnt that the sign for "old" in Chinese is synonymous with wise, experienced, respectable. If you look up the Swedish word for old in a dictionary you will find the synonyms antique, obsolete, out-of-date, old-fashioned, senile, and dusty. This says something, not only about our different languages, but also about our mentalities. In Sweden and in a great part of the western world, we have to re-learn to respect and value our citizens even after they retire. It is easy to view older people as an economic burden and a strain on our health care systems but one does not become obsolete at 60 or 65. Older people are still important members of society and they can still contribute to the common good. With a greater respect for the elderly comes a more positive approach to ageing.

In the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the concept "a society for all" was widened to "a society for all ages". Sweden fully agrees with the Secretary-General's basic idea behind a society for all ages, which means that all age groups are equally valuable.

When we talk about ageing populations as burdens and challenges for societies we should bear in mind populations in some part of the world for whom just reaching old age is a challenge. There are countries that today have the same average life expectancy numbers that Sweden had a century ago. If such dramatic positive change could be achieved in Sweden it can also be achieved elsewhere - and much faster.

Health improvements through out the life span – from diminished child mortality to healthy ageing create possibilities for both individual and societal development. When parents realise that their children survive and that other structures than their children can provide for them when they get old it is natural that birth rates fall. Other incentives than pure family economics are needed to promote child bearing. Sweden has, despite being one of the more aged societies, higher birth rates than many other developed countries - and this in combination with a very high participation by women in the labour market. There are several reasons for this, for instance an active gender equality policy including among other things individual taxation, a well developed child care system, parental leave schemes, economic transfers etc.

An other important feature to make citizens feel safe is a sustainable pension system. When the pension system was introduced in Sweden in 1913 the age for retirement was set at 67. At that time the average life expectancy was 55 years for men and 58 for women. Now life expectancy is around 80. A new pension system now promotes longer labour market participation. It is no wild guess that people in the future will be active in the labour market much longer. How long you participate in the labour market will depend more on individual health and economic situation than on a certain fixed age. This will to some extent compensate for the somewhat fewer persons in the younger generations.

In order to allow people – women as well as men - to participate in working life and not having to care for their parents there is also a need for a developed care of the elderly. The ageing population represents a growing economic and political force in our societies. It is important to adapt societies to the needs and wishes also of its older citizens. The ageing populations will demand to be taken seriously, to be part of society and finally to be treated with respect and dignity when they finally need the health and social care from society. Ageing is not only about economic consequences but also about human values.

Sweden would welcome increased exchange in experiences on social protection systems with other countries, not least experiences of elderly care systems as examples on how to achieve a dignified old age in combination with high participation in the labour market.