

**28<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations  
International Day of Older Persons  
(UNIDOP)**

Organized by the NGO Committee on Ageing in New York,  
In partnership with UNDESA

by  
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Thursday, 4 October 2018  
(10 am to 1 pm)

The International Day of Older Persons was observed at the UN on 4 October 2018. A Meeting marked the event. It was held in the ECOSOC Chamber. The Vice-President of AFICS/NY and its Secretary attended on behalf of retirees. The event was organized by the NGO Committee on Ageing in New York. As in the past, it was sponsored by the Mission of Argentina but also co-sponsored by a Group of Friends of Older Persons at the United Nations. Mostly Latin America-based, the Group also includes a number of Asian and African countries.

**Old Age and Human Rights**

From the outset, the organizers drew attention to the timing of the event which added to its salience. 2018 marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (G.A. Res. 217 III, 10 December 1948). This historic declaration owed much of its traction to the leadership and counsel of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt who pressed for its adoption against dissenting voices from many conservative circles. It broke new ground emphatically in that, beyond the formal rights to freedom of religion, speech and assembly, as well as equal protection of all under the law, the 1948 Universal Declaration included:

- a) equal access for all to one's country's public service (Art. 21);
- b) the right to social security (Art. 22);
- c) an equal right to work, freedom from job insecurity and even equal pay for equal work (Art. 23);
- d) the right to rest and leisure, with humane work conditions (Art. 24);
- e) the right to life in dignity; safeguarding health and welfare for all, including protection in old age "or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [one's] control" (Art. 25); and last but not least,
- f) the right to education and free participation in cultural activities (Art. 26).

As the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this momentous document approaches, making these rights reality remains a major challenge in most parts of the world, developed or developing. Indeed, one might well argue that escalating conflicts, disparities of income, and related inequalities of power and prospects, that these carried in their trail, had rendered equal rights hard to approximate. On the upside, however, two significant trends had emerged which the event on 4 October brought into sharp relief. One such important trend brought humanity much closer to gender equality than it had ever been, rejecting stereotypes that had dominated the world for centuries or millennia. Our understanding of “*gender*” had been modified in this process.

In a related trend, universal understanding of “groups in special need” and of “affirmative action”, in addressing those very needs, had likewise made headway. Beginning with women and children, with motherhood and childhood (Art. 25), new categories included “people with disabilities” and, more recently, “older persons”. As has been the case with the former, the latter and some governments on their behalf are currently demanding a “dedicated” charter to guarantee the rights of people in old age. Remarkably, this Charter, which has gained a lot of traction among developing countries, is still resisted forcefully in North America and Europe.

### **Ageing and Ageism**

The Meeting made a point of stressing the need for *advocacy* in an effort to dispel residual stereotypes that block our understanding of old age. The term “*Ageism*” has been coined to bring to light these stereotypes, which are not going away. Both the Opening Session and the Panel Discussion, which followed, largely focused their attention on dispelling stereotypes. Sexuality, for instance, which few people are inclined to associate with old age seems to be alive and well with more than 40 percent of the 60-85 cohort remaining sexually active. Ditto for entrepreneurship, scholarship, innovation and education, even running the marathon, where people make their mark well past retirement age.

Indeed still set at 60 or 65, retirement age no longer seemed to make sound economic sense. It takes too little cognizance of demographic trends. These were discussed extensively by most of the speakers and graphically emphasized in a chart that was included in the folder for participants. This showed the proportion of people aged 60+ jumping from 901 million in 2015 to 1.4 billion in 2030 and more than two (2) billion in 2050. Indeed by 2050, the number of older persons would exceed that of children under 15. It has already surpassed the number of children under five (5). An even more critical issue is the trend in life expectancy at birth, which varies very widely from one country to another but, *globally*, is increasing at an appreciable pace, from an average of 70.5 in 2015, to an expected 73.6 in 2030 but more than 77 in 2050. Given progress in health care, this trend is unlikely to change; if anything, indeed may well accelerate in years to come.

These change in demographics are markedly uneven around the world but still presenting challenges to the United Nations, governments and societies, which are not adequately addressed. The country ageing fastest is Japan, with four more in East Asia close on its heels, as well as Southern Europe where ageing is compounded by mass emigration of youth in search of job opportunities. Emigration is a factor also in the Southern Hemisphere, in Africa in particular,

where low fertility rates remain far less pronounced. Bringing to light the contrast between these diverse patterns in different parts of the world, the Meeting drew attention to overarching challenges affecting all the countries, in one or another.

### **No Country is an Island**

No country is an island. Whether propelled by wars, physical insecurity or lack of job opportunities, migration across borders has been intensified around the globe, widely engendering issues of personal safety, which affect older persons disproportionately. On the brighter side, Panel Members intervening on the trends in public health underscored the progress made but also stressed the need to address growing disabilities that are specially pronounced in old age. Alzheimer's and dementia were extensively discussed in this context. What came as a surprise was the incidence of STDs in prison populations, notably in the USA, among older persons especially. A general conclusion that one could draw from the Meeting, was the pressing need to engage in long-term strategic planning and a systemic analysis of demographic trends. Old age is multi-faceted and is not going away. As a recent meeting in Jeju, Korea demonstrated, the governments and pension funds of most countries situated in the Northern Hemisphere are already feeling the pinch.

However, other aspects and derivatives of ageing also remain unknown or unaddressed; and certainly have not received the attention which they deserve. The impact of technology and medicine, both helping older persons remain independent and active well beyond 85, was mentioned at the meeting. Less tangible were stereotypes which continue to plague older persons. The cure that was suggested in countering these stereotypes is meaningful and frequent *inter-generational contact; de-segregation*, in fact, of older persons who, in all too many cases, subsist in isolation, "sent to pasture", confined to old age homes or otherwise removed from the "hustle and bustle of life" in "assisted living" facilities.

### **Getting our Priorities Right**

Potentially world-wide, the rapid ageing process combined, in many countries, with longer life expectancy, will represent steep challenges – among the most significant that we may have to face in the decades to come. Not only retirement policies but town-and-country planning, as well as social services and medical facilities may have to be rethought in light of new realities. The costs of needed changes and adjustments will certainly be high. However, these may soon prompt us to revisit, revise and reorder our national priorities. As one of the participants pointedly observed, the world is currently spending US\$ 1.7 trillion on armaments (upwards from US\$ 700 billion for the USA alone). Is US\$ 1.7 trillion per annum for arms and weapons systems money well spent? Could we not use it better for purposes of fighting climate change, promoting education, job creation, public health and social protection? An ageing population world-wide may yet help us re-discover the principles and values enshrined in the UN Charter, as well as the all-important human rights dimension of dignity and security in old age.