

## **29<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations International Day of Older Persons**

**(UNIDOP)**

### **The Journey to Age Equality**

**ECOSOC Chamber, UNHQ, New York**

**10 October 2019 (10 AM – 1 PM)**

As promised and requested, I represented AFICS at the above-mentioned meeting. The caption of the meeting: “*A Journey to Age Equality*” also served to bring to light the distance that the Cause of Older Persons globally has covered, in close to 40 years. What started as a *plea*, coupled with a plan of action in 1982 and GA Resolution 46/91 of 16 December 1991, has now morphed into a *claim* advanced in the name of *Equality*. As both the presentation and the ensuing debate have shown, observance of IDOP, this time around especially, clearly represented a *paradigm shift* in the ways Old Age is viewed, increasingly in our day, compared with the end of last century. Both speakers and discussants explored a range of causes which brought about this change.

### **The Demographic Challenge**

Demography comes foremost among the contributing factors. Although unevenly spread around the globe, aging is rapidly changing the profile and composition of the world’s population. The process is uneven; less pronounced in the Southern Hemisphere, where numbers are still growing, though at a slower pace. In the Northern Hemisphere and developed countries, by contrast, aging is fast creating a distinct new category: the 80+. It has been estimated that their numbers will soon triple, from roughly 150 million in 2019 to nearly 450, in 2050. Concurrently, delivery of vastly improved health services is also pushing boundaries of both employability and the retirement age. In large swaths of the North, retirement at age 60 is becoming an *anachronism* for many categories, of professionals especially. However, this development is not without its challenges at both ends of the spectrum age-wise.

Brought the fore – and the floor – at this year’s IDOP Meeting a new concept – *malleability* – calls both for extensive *research* and *policy innovation*, nationally and internationally. As

the 10 October meeting clearly demonstrated, an emerging new reality in North America, Europe and East Asia in particular, calls for novel approaches to policy, especially in the areas of health, education and housing but also employment practices. However, more than resource allocation, changing what needs to be changed will demand a transformation in the ways we consider old age. Until recently, in effect, the 60+ category – mostly retirees – were generally viewed as a *post scriptum*; a cohort in need of *protection*, still active with their families, mostly taking care of children, but not generally expected to play more than a passive role either in the public sphere or in the market place. To radically change this antiquated view, *ageism* will have to go the way of *sexism*, *racism* and other stereotypes, which never made much sense but, currently and increasingly, effectively block attempts to address the global *challenges*. Several speakers and a video, that was shown in the course of the meeting, underscored the growing importance of “*transformational*” thinking, moving beyond old stereotypes on age and aging.

### **Ageism: a Stereotype; need to think out of the box**

One such old stereotype viewed aging needs essentially through the prism of superannuation, i.e. retirement pensions and pension funds. With rapidly advancing longevity but sadly also abuses in the form of populist practices, several pension funds in North America, Europe and East Asia are confronted with steep challenges. The likelihood of *cuts* or even funds defaulting was raised in the course of the meeting, as new and innovative ways of saving for old age were recommended. It soon became apparent that few of the modalities, that were proposed, were widely available throughout the world or even in the Northern Hemisphere. With yields on interest rates at an all-time low and *market volatility*, there were no good alternatives to pension funds, especially those covering the basic health requirements.

A question that came up for discussion at the meeting put the issue bluntly in terms of *re-ordering priorities*. Is the *taxation* burden spread equitably across the various income levels? Are we not over-spending on wars and military ventures? Is it not fair to ask whether one trillion dollars in military expenditure by one country alone, could be used more productively – in part at any rate -- on welfare, social security and programmes calculated to make the “old-age” cohort, i.e. the 80+, as well as 60+ more productive and employable much longer. Representatives of DESA, the I.L.O. and WHO, as well as AARP, came up with interesting findings that had been obfuscated by mighty stereotypes:

- Old age need not be a burden; current research indicates that activity, innovation, productivity and entrepreneurship are both alive and well long past the age of 50. With life expectancy growing by 2-3 years on average in every single decade, it is extremely important to tap into this source and valuable resource, more widely and effectively.

- Age is truly a social construct often used to reinforce other long-held stereotypes. Coupling *ageism* and misogyny thus, in the past, produced a very unflattering image of women in old-age. This has now been exploded in a book only recently published. The author is Gail Collins; the title: “*No stopping us now*”, New York, Little Brown & Co., 2019.
- Two *needs* that need revisiting are: training for *life-long learning* and *aging-smart health-wise*.

In several societies, mostly in developing countries, *literacy* in old-age has become a *sine qua non* for improved cross-generational communication, as well as for *enabling* and *empowering* older persons both in the market place and the political sphere. As a number of speakers remarked, unbroken life-long learning offers people in old-age a *competitive advantage*, that few might have suspected only a few decades ago. To be sure, a sound condition of health represents a needed requisite. Precisely on this account, the WHO proclaimed the next ten years as the Decade of Healthy Aging: 2020-2030. It will focus on the *equity* and *centrality* of health care across all generations for the good of society as a whole.

As both the presentation and panel discussions showed, the concept of old-age is changing world-wide; taking on a wholly new character. With many of the societies of the Northern Hemisphere acknowledging the prospect that, by 2030, 40 per cent or more of citizens and residents will be over the age of sixty, *reconfiguring* old age has become a pressing need. No longer is the treatment of Older Persons merely as in need of protection acceptable, as in the past. Nor is it chiefly an issue of Human Rights, important though these are. Activity and employment beyond the age of 60 is taking on a new, mostly pragmatic complexion. Acknowledging, respecting, indeed enhancing these *rights* will soon become an issue of facing new realities. Ageism, in all its forms, like sexism, ethnocentrism, racism and xenophobia will have to be rejected as costly, counterproductive and as both socially and politically unacceptable and harmful.

The International Day of Older Persons (IDOP) was closed by the President of the General Assembly. He summed up the debate stating that it had demonstrated the need to accept the fact that people over 60 represented a growing portion with considerable potential to play their part as active members and stakeholders of society; certainly *not* a burden on society as a whole.