

**Ministerial Conference on Ageing**  
**of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)**  
**in Berlin, 11 to 13 September 2002**

**Contribution to the Plenary Session on 13 September 2002**  
**on behalf of**  
**the accredited non-governmental organizations**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear colleagues and friends,

I have the privilege and the honour to represent and speak on behalf of the non-governmental organizations' community at this Ministerial Conference on Ageing which is focussed on a Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan on Ageing 2002.

The fact that NGOs are so well represented at this conference and that we have been asked to contribute with an NGO declaration to the final session of this very important event highlights an unprecedented case of government-civil society cooperation during the preparations for this conference. Never have non-governmental organizations been so closely involved and had such great opportunities to make their ideas and concerns heard during the different strategic and conceptual processes and during the governmental negotiations leading to the UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy.

NGO observer representatives participated in the three expert meetings which suggested the crucial issues to be addressed by the implementation strategy. Two out of the ten members of the Secretariat's drafting group were NGOs, and five high level delegates from the NGO community took part in the Open Ended Working Group which negotiated the Political Declaration and the Strategy itself.

Recognizing fully the unique chances of this opportunity and its potential to serve as a guide for further similar cooperation and particularly for putting into practice the Regional Implementation Strategy, the NGOs organized themselves in a highly focussed content and process oriented methodology so that their joint contributions would be of maximum benefit for governmental entities responsible for the well-being of the populations of their countries and the people of all ages they represent.

At the end of the negotiations and reviewing the texts of the Political Declaration and the Regional Implementation Strategy to be signed today, we must say that we are not at all totally satisfied with the general orientation of these documents, nor with the measures and actions suggested. We are particularly disappointed with the weak and uninspiring follow-up process and the fact that governments did not have the courage to opt for an organized continuous, strong, transparent and participative monitoring process.

However, we definitely acknowledge that the UNECE and the Governments of the region have certainly lived up to their commitment to closely associate peoples' organizations to their work on the implementation strategy, that they have been very attentive to our contributions, that they have not shied away from substantial debates with us and that they have thus actively promoted a new understanding and forward looking practice for modern, participative and accountable ways of governance and partnership. On behalf of the NGO community, let me warmly thank you for this most positive attitude which greatly encourages us - despite the quite serious limitations which do not seem to allow for a more in depth, interdependent relationship.

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Most of the NGOs interested in and associated with the Madrid and Berlin processes were organizations either representing older persons themselves, advocating for their interests or caring for them. We are quite comfortable acknowledging and agreeing that the Madrid International Plan of Action and the Berlin Regional Implementation Strategy not only and principally address the situation of older persons but also the rapidly ageing societies of the future.

“Building a sustainable society for all ages” is the real challenge. It goes to the heart of one of the problems humanity faces. It requires contributions from and the cooperation of all major actors in society. In fact a new societal contract is urgently needed - based on economic and social justice, equality and equity, solidarity and sustainability. This approach to the phenomenon of ageing is critical. This approach will determine the general understanding and the self-image of all generations and the fate of society during the next decades, even into the next century. It can profoundly condition our political culture and massively influence decisions in all policy areas.

The message “together let us build a sustainable society for all ages” firstly has to be addressed to the middle aged and young generations – the leaders of today's decision making processes and the ones preparing themselves to lead in their turn. The fundamental objective must be to develop their understanding of the absolute need for multi-generational solidarity which has two directions: ascending and descending. It means to give support and recognition to older persons and to ensure good quality of life for the generations to come.

For older persons this means respect, recognition and the possibility to actively participate in and contribute to society as well as the needed material assistance. To have a say, to voice one's ideas, needs and aspirations, to be listened to and understood, and to be valued – those are among the most important needs and hopes of older persons in modern societies. Older persons have a lot to contribute to the well-being of all of us: experience, wisdom, calmness, long term thinking, balancing interests, transmission of values, caring for others, and planning for succession. They must be viewed as resources, not burdens in society. This tremendous asset must be harnessed for the benefit of all.

The principles of inter-generational solidarity and sustainability have as prerequisites a solid set of individual and societal values, a deep rooted confidence in the advantage of long term policies and economic, social and cultural investments, and must include understanding about the necessity of participative, transparent and accountable governance.

Unfortunately we have to say here that today's state of the world does not reflect such enabling conditions. Governments and parliaments and even some NGOs seem to be driven by short term decisions under the auspices of power driven interests. Shareholder value goals, unfair competition and corruption are common parameters in many arenas.

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But there have been encouraging processes and there is a lot of hope in the air. The major United Nations world conferences – like i.e. the Copenhagen World Social Summit and the Madrid World Assembly on Ageing – have formulated commitments and traced strategies which would directly lead to that good world which people aspire to: a world based on economic and social justice, gender equality, poverty reduction as well as equity, solidarity and sustainability. There is only one critical element missing: all the good ideas and planned actions need to be implemented, the commitments have to be fully honoured by the Governments, and all societal actors have to do what they have promised to do. Nothing more than that! Proper implementation is the key. Do we, as Governments and NGOs have the social will and the political will to pursue this essential goal?

(Now, after a long and intensive process of analysis and assessment, debates between various societal parties - advocating for needs, identifying responsibilities, reasoning limitations – and endless negotiations on big and small issues we have all come together here in Berlin to see the politically responsible representatives of the 55 member states of the UNECE sign their common Political Declaration and the joint Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 . All of these are based on societal needs and convictions, as well as governments commitments formulated by earlier processes of the United Nations, which were developed and signed in good faith!)

The documents to be signed today for adoption again promise a great future for mankind. They address most of the essential challenges. They outline the required policies, programmes and measures. We agree with most of the content and confirm that this is, again, a solid piece of craftsmanship, oriented towards the future and full of good intentions.

However, the decisive cornerstone of the whole construction is basically missing. Sadly this is due not to negligence but to intention. It is most disappointing that there is no provision for a strong follow-up and an effective monitoring process. And this despite the various constructive proposals and demands from the NGO community as well as from some member states and the UNECE Secretariat.

We are very disheartened in this respect and have serious doubts as to how much of any implementation strategy will become reality.

For us, the NGO community, an implementation strategy worth its name requires as a 'conditio sine qua non' the commitment for an adequately organized and continuous follow-up process with strong elements of monitoring, with systematic assessment and fair evaluation of progress achieved. Part of the follow-up process is, obviously, regional cooperation with exchange of experiences, good ideas and practices. But effective cooperation requires also regional solidarity through adequate support – be it by intellectual, technical or material help.

The process of monitoring has to be structured, participative and transparent. It needs to involve all relevant actors at every stage in order to benefit from their resources and their expertise. Monitoring is in itself part of the implementation mechanism as it stimulates all parties concerned to continuously and effectively implement their share in the plan of action and holds them at the same time accountable for what they do and how they do it.

(In particular monitoring will fulfil the following aims:

- Monitoring will enable Member States to identify accurately those areas where they can benefit most from mutual support and exchange.
- Monitoring provides the opportunity to work together to improve data across the region and to provide better evidence to underpin policy-making.
- Monitoring will pinpoint and highlight successful policies and strategies, and will provide robust explanations of why policies are effective and how particular outcomes have been achieved.)

It is also important that monitoring recognizes the different points of departure, the various cultures and the available means of each of the countries. Thus it should promote and measure progress achieved instead of aiming at unhelpful and simplistic comparisons. At the same time monitoring should provide quality data, analysis and assessment leading to additional knowledge and the identification of best practice in order to initiate and support sound and sustainable policy making.

We, the NGO community, voice the concerns, needs and aspirations of older persons. We also represent their commitment towards society, their capacities and their energies. Consequently we consider ourselves not only as the necessary watchdogs of governments' action or non-action but also as their full fledged partners – ready to cooperate in mutual respect for the common goal.

Despite the obvious fact that member states have successfully avoided to commit themselves formally to a clear and strong follow-up and monitoring process, absolutely indispensable for the success of the Regional Implementation Strategy, we firmly believe that ways and means must be developed to organize, utilize and practice appropriate processes. To do less is to risk losing credibility and respect. To do less in an increasingly aware constituency is to lose stature and standing, if not actual position.

We shall remind you and your constituencies of the need to implement and monitor. We shall certainly help you as fair partners to find the right solutions. Looking back to our recent cooperation which we consider as exemplary. We have developed a certain degree of optimism for the future of our relationships. Together we shall strive and we predict that we shall be able to do more for the well-being of our societies and of the people we care for and care about.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.