

ADDRESS AT THE MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON AGEING  
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BY

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Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address you at the opening of the Ministerial Conference on Ageing, the first major regional intergovernmental meeting after the Second World Assembly on Ageing. Our role is to take an important step forward along the road to and beyond Madrid. Our key aim is to adopt the two documents - the Berlin Ministerial Declaration: A Society for all Ages in the UNECE Region and the Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002.

The world today is in the midst of a profound demographic transformation which includes population growth and population ageing. Population growth has been the defining feature of this transformation through the twentieth century and a dominant trend for developing countries. Population ageing will be the essential characteristic during the twenty-first century. Nevertheless in a growing number of regions, particularly in some of the most developed ones, it will be accompanied by population decline. In Europe, which has been at the forefront of this transformation, many societies are expected to have by 2050 over one-third of the population age 60 and above, and less than one-fifth below age 20.

The international community first took up the challenge of formulating a universal response to ageing at the World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982. The Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing was a visionary document: it identified ageing as a challenge which, with the passage of time, only grew bigger, spreading to all corners of the globe. It recommended a variety of sound policy responses to meet that challenge. However, the Vienna Assembly was not followed by a concerted implementation of the Plan. This should serve as a lesson to us as we embark on this Conference.

Two decades later, the international community met again, this time to reassess implications of ageing worldwide and draw up a new international plan of action. With the Spanish Prime Minister in the chair, the United Nations Secretary General as a speaker at the opening, and Heads of State, Prime Ministers, Ministers and other high government officials representing some 160 United Nations Member States, the Madrid Assembly was a major world event. It elevated the issue of ageing to a high point on the global policy agenda. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 will enlighten actors in the ageing policy field for years to come. Significantly for us, the Plan called on the United Nations regional commissions to translate it into regional action plans.

Today, only five months after Madrid, the member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe are ready to consider and adopt such a plan for the UNECE region. The drafting of the Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) has been completed within the short space of time between Madrid and Berlin, truly a major accomplishment.

The beginnings of the work on the RIS go back to early last year. As part of the first phase of the work, the experts deliberated on three occasions, identifying key challenges arising from ageing and making recommendations on requisite policy responses. The results they arrived at along with the proposals of the UNECE secretariat that complemented them became a basis for deliberations and negotiations among representatives of the member States. The negotiations of the Strategy and the accompanying Berlin Ministerial Declaration were by and large carried out within a period of just over two months following Madrid.

The Open-Ended Working Group faced a triple challenge. It had to ensure that the RIS is securely anchored in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002, that it further develops the agreements contained in the Plan and that it fully takes into account the realities of our region. The Group fully met the challenge: the RIS is a far-reaching strategy which provides the member States with a comprehensive framework for implementing the Plan at all levels, from local to national.

The RIS strikes the right balance between the two competing approaches that came to the fore during the negotiations - one that sought to place older persons at the heart of the document and the other that strived to have society for all ages at its core. The proponents of the alternative approaches argued their respective cases and, in the process, crafted a masterly compromise. As a result, objectives and policy actions focusing on older persons permeate the document, as do those that concern different groups and society as a whole.

The overall approach of the Strategy is praiseworthy: it is holistic, all-inclusive and multifaceted, just to mention a few of its attributes. Its consequences are many qualities of the document, which can be illustrated by the following points the document makes. Ageing is perceived as one but most important aspect of the complex demographic changes. These changes pose far-reaching challenges to our societies, but also offer many opportunities. To respond to them, it is essential to mainstream ageing into various policy fields. Policies for different sectors, systems and groups, ought to be comprehensive, well coordinated and mutually supportive. The challenge is for society as a whole to adapt to the changes.

Moreover, as the numbers and proportions of older persons continue to rise, the Strategy rightly places ample emphasis on this group. Older persons are recognised as a valuable resource, who make essential contributions to families, communities and societies. Enabling them to continue to participate fully in all aspects of life, including work, is of special importance. Safeguarding rights and fundamental freedoms of older persons and other groups is of the highest priority. Equally important are the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the combating of all types of neglect, abuse and violence against them and other members of society.

Both the format of the RIS and the arrangement of the material within the document proved of great importance to the Open-Ended Working Group. The Group identified ten commitments as the principal building blocks of the Strategy. They suggest the depth and breath of the RIS. Their placement within the document signifies the importance the member States attached to the various commitments. The commitments on the mainstreaming of ageing into various policy fields and on full integration and participation of older persons in society were deliberately placed at the top of the list. The commitments on economic growth, social protection systems and labour markets, originally leading the list, were moved to the third to fifth positions. The rest of the commitments stayed where they were originally placed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a former Finance Minister, I could not resist looking at the RIS from the point of view of an economist. Possibly due to this bias, I could not but appreciate the fact that the Strategy conveys an extremely important message, namely that economic fundamentals of our ageing societies must be sound if we are to successfully respond to demographic changes. Environmentally and socially sustainable economic growth, as discussed recently in Johannesburg (WSSD) is a prerequisite for a successful adaptation of our societies to ageing. Only if sustainable development is achieved at a sufficiently rapid pace can we expect our governments and other actors in the ageing field to adequately respond to the challenge.

As a professional woman, I also note the attention that the Strategy accords gender issues. The message that the RIS communicates on this score is commendable: gender equality will be an increasingly important aim in our ageing societies. It should be pursued for its own sake, but also in order to enable women and men to more easily combine their family and work roles, in particular care giving, unpaid work and employment. It will be a key prerequisite for women to fully participate in society, economy and the labour market and to fully share in the benefits these offer, including social protection and social security benefits.

And finally, due to my origins, I welcome paragraphs 6 to 7 of the Ministerial Declaration in which awareness of social and economic differences in the region is underlined and it is agreed that assistance should be enhanced to countries with economies in transition which are less equipped to face the challenges of population ageing.

I wish to single out one more salient message of the Strategy, the one that stresses the importance of embracing and implementing a new approach to the individual's life course. The traditional ordering of education, work and retirement is no longer sustainable in our ageing societies. Education should be a life-long experience, ensuring that our knowledge and skills are continually upgraded as we age; this would guarantee our employability into old age. Similarly, our employers should allow for breaks enabling us, among other things, to care for our young and old and to pursue whatever other interests we may have. This would require that retirement be deferred to a more advanced age, permitting us to remain integrated and active much longer than is now the case. This new life course approach, which will require adaptations at both individual and societal levels, would also presuppose efforts on the part of the

individual and society to promote and maintain health and well-being throughout life, enabling independent living in old age.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The contributions of the Madrid Assembly and the Berlin Conference will be judged not so much by the quality of the documents they adopted, but by the improvements which the implementation of these documents on the ground will bring to the daily lives of ordinary people. I cannot, therefore, stress enough the importance of the implementation of the Plan and the Strategy. I salute the UNECE member States for concluding the Berlin Ministerial Declaration by the following words: "We are convinced that putting into effect the Regional Implementation Strategy is the best way of implementing the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 in the UNECE region and, therefore, we will spare no effort at achieving this objective."

The RIS sets out a number of sound principals for implementation. It states, inter alia, that the UNECE member States have the primary responsibility for the implementation and follow-up of the Strategy. The follow-up should focus on strengthening cooperation among UNECE member States in the field of ageing. It will be pursued by the member States at the national level and within the existing framework of meetings of the UNECE. The document recalls that the Commission for Social Development is responsible for the global follow-up and appraisal of the Plan. In view of this, the RIS emphasises the need for its follow-up to be consistent with the procedures and timing of the global monitoring and review to be decided upon by this Commission.

These and other elements of the RIS commitment on the promotion of the implementation and the follow-up of the Strategy have been agreed upon through lengthy and, at times, difficult negotiations. However, differences in positions of the member States contributed to some degree of ambivalence and inconsistency in the text of this particular commitment that pertain to the role of the UNECE secretariat in the follow-up and to resources in support of the secretariat's follow-up activities. Thus, the Strategy stipulates that the UNECE secretariat's follow-up activities must be financed within existing resources only to indicate a moment later that the Economic and Social Council could consider strengthening the capacity of UNECE.

In spite of these weaknesses, this commitment provides a viable framework for the promotion of the implementation and follow-up of the Strategy through regional cooperation. The UNECE secretariat stands ready to work closely with the member States within this framework and to make a contribution to the follow-up to Berlin. We also look forward to collaborating with all other partners who have stakes in implementing the Strategy. Noted among these are non-governmental organizations and other civil-society actors, including trade unions, as well as employers associations and other private-sector partners. Here I also include institutions and organizations, and among them United Nations agencies, particularly those active in the areas of statistics, indicators, research and training in the population field.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, I would like to address the Chair of the Conference. Dr. Bergmann. Since assuming the office of UNECE Executive Secretary earlier this year, I have followed with great interest the preparations for the Conference. During this period of intense activities, your Ministry and my organization have closely collaborated in a most efficient manner to make the Conference a success. At the same time the Open-Ended Working Group has carried out much of its important task under the leadership of its able Chair, a member of your staff. To crown these efforts, your Government has made it possible for the member States to meet in this most agreeable setting. Please accept, Madam Minister, my warm thanks for the contributions of your Ministry and the Government of Germany to this Conference.

I wish you all a most productive conference. Thank you.