



EU STATEMENT

2007 UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing

“A Society for All Ages: Challenges and Opportunities”

León, November 8, 2007

Chairman, Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to speak here today on behalf of the European Union.

Thank you very much to the Spanish Government for convening the 2007 UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing “A Society for All Ages: Challenges and Opportunities” here in Leon.

I also want to thank the Executive Secretary of the UNECE and the chairs and organisers of this Ministerial Conference for their excellent preparatory work.

Reaffirming the commitments made in the Berlin Ministerial Declaration in 2002, the EU is very committed to the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and its UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy under way.

As it was recognized in 2002, never before has demographic ageing been so important. Indeed, it is already a reality in most of our regions, in spite of considerable regional and national differences. While some countries have a growing population and an increasing number of younger people, more and more countries are facing a decline in population growth and an increase in the number of older and very old persons.

The fact that people throughout the world live longer should be seen as an enormous opportunity as well as a challenge for both individuals and societies.

In fact, ageing is an opportunity and a challenge, which we can meet if we know how to exploit the window of opportunity of about ten years that is available to us. We must not fail to take this opportunity to ensure that all generations, particularly those of the baby boom, put in place adequate economic and social reforms. It is, in the final analysis, a question of strengthening the renewing of the solidarity pact between generations.

Recent EU initiatives include the Communication “The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity”, adopted on 12 October 2006, providing a frame of reference for the policies adopted by Member States, building upon the Lisbon Strategy and introducing a long-term perspective based on demographic ageing trends.

Chairman,

While reaffirming the three priority directions agreed in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing: Older Persons and development; advancing health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments, I would like to concentrate on three key challenges identified by the EU and its Member States on which it is important to take action:

The first challenge is to manage the economic implications of ageing in order to maintain economic growth.

The EU response to this challenge is linked to active ageing policies and practices and aims at mobilising the full potential of people of all ages, women and men alike and strengthening a new solidarity between generations. Such policies agreed by Member States in the Lisbon Strategy include the promotion of life-long learning and training, improvement of working conditions, encouragement of post-retirement programmes, including health-sustaining activities and the reconciliation of work and personal life, supported by employment-friendly family policies.

The second challenge is to ensure and/or adjust adequate, sustainable and flexible social protection systems and sound public finances.

This is because ageing will require increased expenditure on pensions, health and long-term care, which, in turn means that reforms will need to guarantee sustainable funding, to avoid the collapse of our social protections systems and draw a contribution from all generations.

Therefore, social protection systems are being modernised to take into account demographic changes. Women are increasingly participating in the workforce and the average age for individuals to leave the work force is increasing. Member States are reforming their social protection, health and pension systems in the light of demographic trends. Moreover and in order to make the various processes involved (social inclusion, pension and Healthcare) more operational the Open Method of Coordination itself was rationalised.

The third challenge is to ensure universal access to high quality health and long-term care while ensuring the financial viability of health care systems.

Demographic ageing is creating serious financial, economic and social sustainability problems for pension and health and long-term care with the consequent need for reform, adequate investment in health and social infrastructures and improvements in public sector expenditure management. These are core elements in what is truly an intergenerational problem with long-term implications on the European Social Model.

In fact as the population of EU Member States grows older, current levels of care will not be enough to cope with the increase in the number of persons needing help. Traditionally, families – especially women – have provided home help. But as more women join the labour market, informal care is becoming less available. This is why the Open Method of Coordination has been extended to the area of health and long-term care, helping Member States to develop and improve the quality and coverage of care in the future.

Chairman,

I would like to stress that many of the elements in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the UNECE Regional Strategy are reflected already in the current European Union's policies.

Concluding my statement, I would like to also point out that responses to demographic trends are first and foremost of the responsibility of national authorities. However, cooperation within

the framework of UNECE region is crucial to share experience and to learn from best practices among its Member States, keeping in mind the diversity of national situations.

The European Union encourages countries of the UNECE region to reaffirm and further collaborate in the development of the commitments made in the Madrid International Plan of Action and its regional implementation Strategy, and the Political Declaration to be adopted today, in which we commit ourselves to respond positively to the many challenges that arise as a consequence of population ageing.

Finally, allow me to thank all partners within the UNECE region for their constructive and active role during the preparatory process.

People live longer. Let us strive to make their longer lives better.

THANK YOU.

José António Viera da Silva

Portuguese Minister for Labour and Social Solidarity