

Mainstreaming concerns of older persons into the social development agenda.

Statement by Johan Schölvinnck, Director, DSPD/DESA

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing adopted during the Second World Assembly on Ageing in April 2002 was truly a landmark event. A detailed and well-thought out document, it provides a practical guide for national and international action for years to come. Population ageing was recognized as a major achievement of society as well as a universal force that has the power to shape the future, much akin to globalization. The Plan underscores that it is essential to recognize the ability of older persons to contribute to society by taking the lead not only in their own betterment but also in that of society as a whole. Forward thinking is crucial to embrace the potential of the ageing population as a basis for future development.

Mainstreaming ageing is an important dimension and crucial aspect of the Plan. Mainstreaming is seen as a policy tool and is specifically mentioned in paragraph 15 of the Madrid Plan, and I quote: “Mainstreaming ageing into global agendas is essential. A concerted effort is required to move towards a wide and equitable approach to policy integration. The task is to link ageing to other frameworks for social and economic development and human rights.” Whereas specific policies vary according to country and region, population ageing is recognized as a process that will have a profound impact on societies in numerous ways.

The Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) for the UNECE region adopted soon after the Second World Assembly serves as a starting point and a framework of commitments to support Member States to respond adequately to the challenges and opportunities of population ageing. In the RIS, a specific commitment was made **to mainstream** ageing concerns into all policy fields with the aim of securing gender-sensitive and evidence-based integrated policies to bring societies and economies into harmony with demographic change. This approach applies equally to such sectors as health care, the labour market, social protection and education, as well as the economy as a whole.

It should be recalled that during the first review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing in 2006-2008 all Member States were encouraged to focus their attention on two dimensions: (1) ageing-specific policies and (2) ageing-mainstreaming efforts. Today, I will speak about the latter – the importance of mainstreaming ageing into development agendas.

In general terms, mainstreaming can be defined as a process of bringing issues that have not received the consideration they deserve to the core, if not the center of attention. In that sense, mainstreaming is a vital tool for focus and inclusion. It was successfully tested

in many countries and has been an effective proxy for advocacy of various issues, such as gender and human rights. In a similar vein, mainstreaming can definitely address issues concerning older persons. By definition, mainstreaming is a multi-dimensional effort. Successful mainstreaming should lead to greater social integration of a particular group as well as to the inclusion of a particular issue into all aspects of social, political, economic and cultural life. The overall objective of mainstreaming should be the achievement of a more equitable development within a society for the benefit of *all* social groups. In this light mainstreaming could be an important tool in achieving a society for all ages as called for by the Madrid Plan.

To be effective, policies in response to population ageing should have a holistic approach and be pursued in a coordinated way over a wide range of policy areas. Account must be taken of the multifaceted and intertwined challenges and opportunities arising from population ageing in order to devise a framework from which effective policy responses could emanate. The approach also rests on the premise that a set of well-conceived and well-implemented policies in various domains, properly coordinated and consistently applied, would be able to successfully meet the challenges arising from these demographic changes and release the unused potential embedded in some population groups, in particular older persons. Mainstreaming can be an effective approach to consistently highlight and emphasize ageing in policies, programmes, budgets, laws and international treaties. In this light, what are the essential pre-requisites of successful mainstreaming? The available experience permits to draw some conclusions in this regard.

First, mainstreaming should be done on the basis of well-founded knowledge. Therefore, the comprehensive collection of relevant data is of great importance. Only when sufficient and good quality ageing-related data have been gathered and distilled is it possible for policy makers to develop effective policy approaches. Age-disaggregated data that shed light on the particular living conditions of older persons are obviously of particular interest for policy makers. Lack of such data, however, still remains a major challenge.

Second, in many countries, unfortunately, issues concerning ageing and older persons suffer from a chronic lack of attention and resources. This unenviable situation could in part be explained by the lack of sufficient political visibility as well as a lack of attention to ageing in the development agenda. Newly collected evidence should be disseminated to contribute to the overall knowledge of society regarding ageing and older persons. It should also serve as a vehicle for awareness-raising. Thus, a concerted advocacy campaign has to be designed after data have been collected and analyzed. Sensitizing the public to concerns and conditions of older persons would be a logical next step. Ultimately, consistent and multiple advocacy campaigns should lead to a greater appreciation of the concerns of older persons, to overcoming negative stereotypes, and to developing or adjusting strategies, policies, programmes and legislation that impact the quality of life in order to achieve a society for all.

Third, when data become available and the advocacy campaign is launched, it is essential to develop tools of assessment for the mainstreaming process. Developing benchmarks on which potential progress could be measured and introducing appropriate indicators addressing the results and progress of mainstreaming are important tools to ensure continuous accountability. Performance indicators may be used not only to measure progress of individual well-being of older persons (quality of life indicators) but also highlight the success of overall policy. Some policy action may become inevitable in case the outcome is lagging considerably behind the original expectations. In addition, if there is only little progress in a certain area, one cannot rely on indicators alone but must analyze the root causes of the lack of results.

The review process and fine-tuning of the mainstreaming efforts could be carried out by an office within Government structures which lobbies for the concerns of older persons. The process of mainstreaming should involve the input of many different policy actors at various levels whose experience may be diverse. Every existing policy, programme or law should be evaluated using a simple criterion, namely whether it reflects adequately the concerns of older persons. After the review process has been finalized, adjustments to existing laws and policies should be suggested and implemented. In cases when the letter of the law is clearly against the interests of older persons, changes in the institutional structures should be introduced. Our experience convinces us that some guidelines to mainstream the concerns of older persons into new laws, policies and programmes should be developed **before** any new legislation is introduced and voted on. An additional mainstreaming office or desk should preferably also be established within the Finance Ministry to ensure that ageing is mainstreamed in the annual budget. It goes without saying that it is vitally important to introduce ageing concerns in annual budget reviews and ensure that priorities of older persons are taken into account when decisions on allocation of funds for specific projects and programmes are made.

I would like to emphasize that any attempt to mainstream concerns of older persons along the lines of both development and human rights agendas requires efforts at all levels: from the local and national levels up to the international and intergovernmental level. Multi-level and multi-sectoral efforts need to be effectively coordinated, especially since they relate to wide-ranging themes-- from improving older persons' access to employment opportunities to combating old-age stereotyping and discrimination. The actors involved – notably governments, NGOs, international organizations, and donors – should move towards effective mainstreaming together. In their effort towards building or developing national capacity on ageing, these actors and institutions should develop and share good practices on efficient specific actions and services to foster the creation of further knowledge and to support research. There is a need for a more systematic sharing of good practices at the global level, with particular reference to South-South cooperation. Capacity development should also be facilitated by means of technical cooperation provided by the United Nations system.

The elements outlined above are essential for successful mainstreaming. A note of caution is, however, needed--while conceptualizing adequate measures for future mainstreaming efforts, some preliminary concerns should be addressed. For example:

(1) There are concerns whether mainstreaming might contribute to a partial “disappearance” of some ageing-related issues. When promoting mainstreaming, it is important not to lose sight of the specific needs and expectations of older persons. This leads to an important caveat: mainstreaming **must not** mean diminishing the funding of specific ageing-related programmes or reduce attention to the plight of older persons. As a remedy a twin track approach to policy and programmes on ageing is suggested, that is, to address older persons’ specific needs, and, simultaneously, to foster mainstreaming as a cross-cutting issue.

(2) Since human rights and gender concerns affect *all* individuals, mainstreaming seems to be an effective tool to integrate these issues into overall policy planning. It is, however, a more difficult task to mainstream issues relating to older persons since these issues are usually considered to affect only a certain group. To overcome this predicament and to generate comparable weight and attention to these issues seems to be a challenge. This situation calls for additional efforts such as advocacy, awareness raising, and public education in order to promote the conviction that a sensitive approach to mainstreaming the concerns of older persons will benefit *all* age groups within society.

To sum up, mainstreaming is a useful and potent technique to further the interests and well-being of older persons. It is or can be a convenient tool to promote an equitable age-integrated society for all ages, as called for in the Madrid Plan. Mainstreaming, however, should not be seen as a new panacea to resolve long-standing problems. A realistic approach is essential. Having pointed out the potentials and opportunities that effective mainstreaming could offer, let us be aware of problems and concerns regarding the application of mainstreaming approaches. Mainstreaming could be part of a policy strategy that can be particularly effective if applied prudently but consistently. New policies that are based on careful planning, sensible implementation and rigorous evaluation using well-thought-out indicators could lead to more satisfying results for older persons and ultimately promote the noble goal of a society for all ages.

Thank you.