

UNECE Conference on Ageing

Civil Society Forum

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Contribution by FERPA (European Federation of Retired and Older People), affiliated to the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation)

Delivered by

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Madrid and Berlin (2002): 5 years on

What stands out from the broader pledge on social development given by the United Nations at the Copenhagen World Summit in 1995 is the specific focus placed on ageing issues.

The 2002 Madrid Conference and the Berlin Seminar that followed in September that year – two occasions where FERPA as a voice of civil society was actively to the fore – took stock of the situation and objectives with regard to older persons and their problems.

So, we see León as an initiative whose time has come, and would like to thank not only the UNECE but also the Spanish Government which has actively promoted the holding of this seminar. The presence of civil society organisations, both NGOs and trade unions, reflects a keen awareness of these issues, and also gives us an opportunity to put our views in the public arena, all on the day on which members of academia will also be giving us an updated situation report on the aspects of concern to us.

We sincerely hope that having our debate on 5 November does not turn into a buffer ahead of the intergovernmental conference which follows it, leaving us cut off or out in the political wilderness.

We want the substance of what we have to say, drawn from the daily experience of working with retired and older people, to be given close consideration by the policy-makers and included in the resolutions.

We have kept an interested eye on the policy positions taken by the United Nations over the last 5 years.

We should like specifically to mention the resolution of 2 February 2006 which

stressed that “ in many parts of the world, awareness of the Madrid Plan of Action remains limited”, and renewed the call to governments, the organizations and bodies of the United Nations system and the non-governmental community to reinforce their campaigns of information and active participation.

A word, too, must be said about the policy positions of the UN Commission for Social Development - that development being the key aim - in exhorting all stakeholders to develop practical means for improving social policy on older people.

But it is also important to point to the glaring under-delivery of achievements against objectives: “action plans” have had very limited effects, because government policies in many countries have not matched up to the undertakings entered into.

The European scenario

While the scenario under consideration in this Seminar is much broader, encompassing some non-European regions, what I have to say will focus mainly on the situation in European Union countries, i.e., the political and civic area in which we operate as an expression of the ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation.

The first thing to acknowledge is that, in this time, the European Institutions have put a consistent focus on the problems of older people and the big challenge posed by the demographic revolution and active ageing.

There is a welter of scientific analyses, research and documents that we can refer to, not least the outcomes of the Paris Conference of 13 September 2006, for example.

Europe is getting older: there is no escaping the fact.

I have no intention of reeling off lists of figures here, however important they may be, but there is no ignoring the set of factors that lie behind this phenomenon: rising life expectancy, lower fertility and mortality gains.

Also, many of the “baby-boom” generation are now reaching pensionable age and this will further add to the problem. The forecasts are that within the space of a few decades, a much reduced working age labour force will have to pay the cost of pensions on a 1-to-1 ratio.

The big issues are above all **pension systems** and their conditions. These are often seen as areas of intervention, especially from the view of government spending frameworks, the aim being to put States and their economic systems in a better position to plan for and prevent financial and social difficulties. A few countries have set reform processes going, often through democratically-based participatory debates.

But there are national circumstances where these choices have had to address

major obstacles and difficulties, especially when the processes of sharing and talking to the labour market parties was not guaranteed and where reforms have been used to promote free-market processes that benefit the private and in some cases profit-mongering financial sectors.

Supranational institutions' commitment and ability (especially that of the European Parliament and Commission) to promote a process of mainstreaming equality among the different countries, while abiding by the subsidiarity principle, have proved underwhelming, and have produced a situation characterised by sharp and highly discriminatory inequalities, especially for the weakest countries.

Generally, older people increasingly want to be able to keep their place in society, to continue to be useful and to hand on their ideas and work experiences, especially to the coming generations. This is a rewarding area to explore and safeguard for its potential in further developing civil society as a whole. On the one hand, older people (and it should also be remarked that there is absolutely no consensus on the age at which a person can be described as "older") would stay active while ageing, while on the other hand, the rising generations on the threshold of the labour market could only benefit from it.

New problems

An updated view 5 years on from the Madrid Conference shows the sweeping changes that have occurred in this period.

And not just in terms of population, economic and actuarial trends. Where old age is concerned, new problems have partly or fully emerged, and these of course must be addressed.

I shall attempt to point to a few, but lay no claim to have identified all.

The **status of women** in older age is visibly becoming increasingly problematic. This is not just for economic reasons, as I shall explain later, but also due to the lack of an equality focus in this area. Women's life expectancy is inherently higher, but they are ill-treated in respect of their living conditions, in some countries at least; and there are very many women who live alone, lack the means of subsistence, and inevitably end up vulnerable to poverty.

The conditions of older people **with a disability** or impaired mobility deserve separate consideration. Here, too, while the general rise in hygiene and health standards has led to extraordinary rates of survival compared to the past, it has to be admitted that counselling and care provision for people with serious physical and psychological problems has not kept pace, notwithstanding their longer life expectancies nowadays. Often, these problems are addressed only because of the economic charge to the public purse, and the measures to be taken and the support needed by these people are not always taken into account. Specifically, we believe

that many countries (with the odd noteworthy exception) have not yet taken on board or brought in a valid policy on **dependent older people**. Too often, it is their families who are left to shoulder the burden of this charge all-but unaided.

We shall shortly be seeing the added problem of **ageing immigrants**. This is something new, but which affects very many people and will before long create not a few problems, especially in countries that have so far “used” cheap labour. There will not only be economic changes to address, but also the resulting cultural aspects (family reunification, traditions, etc) which it would be wise to plan for.

Finally, among the emerging issues, I should like to call attention to **young pensioners**. The problem is that, as a result of signal (and sometimes brutal) restructuring policies pursued in both the private and public sectors, many European countries have in recent decades introduced bridging pension or early retirement measures for a very great number of workers. This group of people, who for registration purposes cannot be classed as older people, are in fact living in very reduced circumstances, having been disconnected from working life. They may gain small economic benefits in the short-term, but the outlook is utterly bleak. And the proposed programmes that should have promoted young people’s labour market engagement in exchange for their sacrifices have proved bogus.

Older people’s rights

At its last Congress in May 2007, FERPA approved and disseminated a “Charter of Demands for the Rights of Older People” which I should like to broadly outline to you today, focusing on what older people in our modern society mainly want of democracy and politicians.

First among these demands is **gender equality** and efforts to eliminate discriminations against women, which remain very widespread in Europe: on average, women’s pensions are 15% lower than men’s.

Then, there is a string of rights directly related to the **dignity** of older persons: these include respect for privacy at all times, including in (public or private) care and convalescent homes; the right to remain **active in old age** and to **participate in society**, which also includes the right to communicate and engage with civic life, especially through volunteering and interchange with other generations.

No less important for older people is their **right to housing**. At present, this is still tied up with living conditions that do not bear thinking about, especially in relatively recent democracies or essentially free-market economies. And even more generally, the **right to public services**. The ETUC and FERPA are running a petition in support of a large-scale campaign to raise European public awareness of this. The aim is to alert the public (especially older people) to the risks of a situation where goods and services like water and energy are under indiscriminate attack when these are services that must be accessible and guaranteed to everyone.

FERPA's Charter of Demands contains a catalogue of rights related to the **economic conditions** of pensioners and older people: the **right to a pension** (an income based on the contribution record, and purchasing power incremented over time must be guaranteed within the legally-defined rules and standards); **right to a minimum income** to prevent poverty (funded from public money if need be); **right to fair tax treatment** (there are too many gaps with no tax measures that will benefit older pensioners); **right to access credit** (retired and older people face severe discrimination or are even denied borrowing opportunities notwithstanding their family or own living requirements).

Another key agenda issue for older people is the **right to health**. Access to care provision and efficient, prompt intervention must be guaranteed. No older person must be regarded as a case to be managed; they are human beings invested with dignity and rights. Care and assistance must always be directed towards rehabilitation, and, in any event, towards improved health, even for the chronically ill, for whom it is also essential to develop preventive health provision and, if need be, appropriate rehabilitation services.

So a particular focus needs to be put – as I have just said – on **dependent persons** and the problems involved in that lack of autonomy.

No less compelling is the **right to die in dignity**. With all due respect for individual beliefs and desires, the older person is entitled to a setting of solidarity and support in which to navigate the end of life; patients must be provided with specialised medical care, and the necessary palliative care and pain-relief treatments to ensure them of a natural and peaceful passing-away.

FERPA's final area of demands relates to **personal development and wellbeing**. This refers in particular to the expectations that modern society has to address today; that same society that must also, unlike in the past, address the demands for active participation made by older people. It is also vital recognise pensioners' **right to training**, to round off the lifelong learning experience and prevent the social exclusion of older people (e.g., in respect of new technologies). We also demand a **right to cultural and leisure resources** as a necessary means of ensuring quality of life, keeping an active mind, and relations with other generations. One final thing to add is the **right to freedom of movement and tourism**, an area which both recognises the full exercise of political rights and the right to freedom, and at the same time helps fight against social exclusion by strengthening the cohesion and sense of belonging to a much wider community, as is the case within the European Union.

Who speaks for older people?

What is offered to us here today in León is certainly a very important opportunity to address the problems of ageing and if we all pull together to put these thoughts into practice, the outcomes cannot but be positive for older people and pensioners in many countries, in and outside Europe.

Many other events are organised each year on the initiative of public institutions and through the praiseworthy work of NGOs, foundations, research institutes, and private voluntary organisations at international, national and local level.

Very many professionals and specialists are studying the different problems involved in ageing and coming up with increasingly more specific solutions and interventions.

Regional and local situations depend on the goodwill of many people who give freely of their time and energy to support and volunteering activities.

All the efforts put in by civil society are positive beyond doubt. And spreading the word about this situation and putting it in the public eye at meetings such as this in León have a proven effect. It is an opportunity for us to share our experiences and take examples of good practice on board.

But we still believe there is another requirement. The rights of older people must be brought more in line with those of labour market participants. I am talking about **representation** and **mediation**. The rights of this group of citizens to organise, make demands and be represented must be recognised if the voice of this institutional force is to be heard by politicians, and in order to raise up to a supranational level proposals and demands that are capable of being included in and improving different policy plans.

FERPA was set up in 1993 to assume this role, and has consistently fought to spell out its demand-based approach as the voice for more than 8 million individual members of 40 national trade unions in 25 European countries.

We are a trade union, the ETUC's trade union for retired and older people. We are fully engaged with civil society, but never feel "in competition", anything but - we value the role and work of all the NGOs with which we have productive relations and points in common.

But we contend that older people can make bigger demands, like the implementation of policies that effectively address the big changes in modern society, which respect their dignity, safeguard social protection, emphasise their democratic principles, and through collective bargaining and trade union participation.

All this is bound up in the purpose and political and trade union work done by FERPA and the ETUC. We are always ready to work with those that want to go down this road with us, with those that share our objectives, for the benefit of Europe's older people and pensioners.

Expectations going forward from León

We have expressed our appreciation for today's initiative, but we also have to make it clear that to date, i.e. 5 years after the Regional Implementation Strategy was

adopted in Berlin in 2002, the initiatives taken then have not been properly implemented.

So we want sound resolutions to be passed so that León is not marred by the same thing. That involves providing effective methods of oversight and evaluation, especially with respect to governments, institutions and government agencies that are called on to do their job properly.

We have to stand against a “negative interpretation” of Europe’s ageing and espouse the strategic value of the objectives set by the Madrid Conference - “to build a society for all ages” – and the Plan of Action adopted by the Berlin Conference that sees ageing as an asset.

It is also important to keep our communication network going with the representatives of civil society and enhance it by adopting new means for the exchange of information, with the aim of sharing good practice and joint initiatives.

To conclude, we are aware of how much work goes into organising an event as big as this one, but even so, we believe there is no question of waiting another 5 years before another meeting is held at UNECE’s headquarters.

That is why we are calling on the UN to make every effort to get some Member States to pledge to organise at least a biennial seminar on ageing, not just for the good of older people but for that of society as a whole.