

I León Ministerial Declaration: A Society for All Ages: Challenges and Opportunities¹

1. We, the representatives of member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), gathered at the Ministerial Conference on Ageing from 6 to 8 November 2007 in León, Spain, reaffirm our commitment made in the Berlin Ministerial Declaration² in 2002 to implement the Regional Implementation Strategy³ of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

2. We welcome the continuing gains in longevity as an important achievement of our societies and appreciate the changes and adaptations made in response to population ageing. At the same time, we are also aware that in most countries of the UNECE region, the rapid process of ageing and the onset of decline in the working-age population are bringing the period of the so-called demographic bonus to an end. This has important and far-reaching implications across all spheres of society.

3. We are aware of the considerable differences in the pace of the ageing process among countries of the UNECE region. In most countries, rapid ageing of the population calls for immediate action. In some, a relatively young age structure of the population is projected to prevail for many years, which may allow more time for adjustment.

4. UNECE member States have undertaken significant policy actions to fulfil the 10 commitments of the Regional Implementation Strategy, although much more remains to be done. Many countries in the region are seeing an improvement in care for older persons, including both institutionally and provided for at home, based on free choice, an increase in retirement age and an alleviation of poverty in old age as the achievements resulting from their targeted policies. Achievements in implementing the Regional Strategy also include better national and local-level

coordination in different policy areas and closer involvement of citizens in ageing-related policymaking, including involvement through an organized civil society and scientific community.

5. We remain committed to the ultimate goal of a society for all ages that relies on respect for human rights, on protection against age discrimination, on social cohesion, and on equal opportunities for men and women of all ages. In pursuing this goal, we reaffirm the principles of independent living, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity, as laid out in the United Nations Principles for Older Persons.

6. We are committed to further promote the mainstreaming of ageing across all policy areas at the local, national and international levels. These policies should be based on principles of intergenerational reciprocity, equity and interdependence; they must be comprehensive, properly coordinated, and gender-sensitive, as is the case with the all-inclusive approach of the Regional Implementation Strategy. We commit ourselves to protecting the rights of persons of all ages and to preventing age discrimination and social exclusion.

7. Promotion of a positive image of older persons, including through the education system and media campaigns, can greatly enhance a wider appreciation of the contributions older persons can make to society. We encourage initiatives that raise public awareness about the various and important contributions of older persons to their families and society.

8. Active citizenship, a dynamic civil society and interaction between citizens and government are vital for achieving a society for all ages. These promote social cohesion, help overcome age discrimination, and empower older and younger persons to act for themselves and to work together. We confirm that a favourable environment for active ageing, promotion of lifelong learning, access to modern information and communication technologies, and volunteerism and civic

¹ ECE/AC.30/2007/2, annex I.

² ECE/AC.23/2002/3/Rev.2.

³ ECE/AC.23/2002/2/Rev.6.

engagement are crucial means to promote participation. We recognize the importance of promoting the participation of persons, as they age, in the economic, social, cultural and political life of their societies. The empowerment of older persons and the promotion of their full participation are essential for active ageing, and must be enhanced through appropriate measures.

9. We are committed to continuing our efforts to adjust social protection systems to prevent and reduce poverty and social exclusion and to improve the quality of life at all ages. We strive for timely reforms and policies, with a view to the sustainability of social protection systems. At all stages of reform, adequate standards of pensions, health, personal and family care provisions, and housing must be our goal. We stress the importance of devising policies that enable the pursuit of both economic efficiency and social security and of developing systems of social protection with broader and effective coverage, which should be guided by each country's needs and circumstances.

10. We are committed to further promoting policies that enable people to reach old age in better health and security and to live independently and with dignity. We emphasize that to extend life free from disability and to improve the quality of life in old age, these policies must address the promotion of health and healthy lifestyles and the rehabilitation and empowerment at all stages of the life course, and must improve the prevention, treatment and care of old age-related diseases, frailty and disability.

11. We call for supporting older persons in need of care. We recognize that a successful strategy for care should strive for a balance between paid work and family life as well as between care provided by different care providers. Coordination between care providers such as the public sector, the private sector, the family and civil society must be improved. Specific policies need to be developed to address the growing number of people with health-related problems. We are committed to developing better, sustainable social services as well as health and long-term care for older persons in need, especially for those who choose to stay at home.

12. We recognize that accessibility, dignity, quality standards and most particularly the protection from elder abuse and neglect present

important challenges in care provision. We also recognize and support the contributions caregivers, both men and women, make to society. Men and women of all ages should have equitable and universal access to health care and social services and assistance in accordance with their needs as well as to facilities and services that meet approved standards. These standards must take into account the fundamental principle of treating everyone with dignity. Adequate public resources, strong formal and informal long-term care systems, specialized and sensitized care professionals, and quality assurance mechanisms remain vital prerequisites to providing quality care for all.

13. We are aware that in the context of increasing longevity, life-course transitions among education, work and retirement must be more flexible, leaving room for individual choice with respect to family situation and social security. Such an approach contributes favourably towards releasing the potential of men and women of all ages for the benefit of society, while recognizing their self-fulfilment as individuals, and counteracts age discrimination.

14. We see economic growth as a very important factor in achieving a society for all ages. To promote economic growth in an ageing society, we should make full use of the experience and abilities that older persons have acquired throughout their lives. An older workforce may contribute to greater productivity. Obstacles and disincentives to extend active working life should be removed and work environments adapted to the ageing workforce so that those who wish to can continue to work. These measures would also contribute to tackling poverty among older persons. Health and social protection are important factors for economic growth, and provide the foundation for a longer working life and a higher employment rate.

15. Products and services that take into account the preferences and needs of older persons can improve quality of life and support independent living. We encourage governments and enterprises to pay attention to such products and services and to take advantage of the opportunities they provide for economic growth and social inclusion. Broader access to technological aid and devices should be made available to older people.

16. We are aware that lifelong learning and training can contribute to economic growth, as it increases the potential of men and women to contribute in the labour market. At the same time, the learning process itself promotes participation in society and self-realization. We strive to take a life-course perspective to learning and to create environments and incentives that promote lifelong learning and training, for the enhancement and retention of jobs for citizens of all ages and all social groups.

17. We are committed to promoting intergenerational solidarity as one of the important pillars of social cohesion and of civil society. We encourage initiatives that raise public awareness of the potential of young people and of older persons and that promote the understanding of ageing and intergenerational solidarity.

18. We are aware that very low birth rates, if they prevail over a long period, can greatly magnify the challenges posed by population ageing in the future. We commit ourselves to family-friendly policies aiming at the reconciliation of work with family life and with responsibilities for dependent relatives in particular. Such policies can counteract a decrease of the birth rate to very low levels and can augment the employment rate. Those with caring responsibilities, a majority of whom today are women, must be supported in their caring activities, must be protected from marginalization in their professional activities and in social protection systems, and must be offered information, training and respite care.

19. We call for strengthening international cooperation in implementing the Regional Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the León Ministerial Declaration,

taking into account the situation and different needs of individual countries. We appreciate the exchange of experience and good practices provided in the framework of the UNECE in collaboration with the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, affiliated with the United Nations, and the International Institute on Ageing, United Nations-Malta, and note with gratitude the financial support from Austria, Spain and the United Nations Population Fund. We recommend that monitoring and implementation activities be continued and further developed.

20. We are aware that research is vital to the development of effective policies and programmes. Sustainable research infrastructures and cross-sectoral cooperation should be further strengthened and developed.

21. We recognize that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in representing people and their needs in society and thus can contribute to policymaking. We encourage cooperation with NGOs.

22. We welcome voluntary contributions from UNECE member States and from the international community in support of international cooperation for promoting the implementation of the Regional Strategy, exchanging experiences in its implementation and monitoring.

23. We reaffirm the role of UNECE, in collaboration with other stakeholders, to assist member States in implementing the Regional Strategy of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the León Ministerial Declaration.

24. We express our sincere gratitude to the Kingdom of Spain for hosting the 2007 UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing and for its hospitality.