

Summary of the First Ministerial Roundtable

"Encouraging longer working life and ability to work"

The first Ministerial Roundtable started with the keynote speech presented by Mrs. Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, European Commission. The panel discussion started with contributions from:

- Mr. Martin Klöti, President of the Cantonal Ministers for Social Affairs, Switzerland,
- Mr. Grigory Lekarev, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Russian Federation,
- Mrs. Edeltraud Glettler, Director-General, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria.

Three initial interventions were followed by the roundtable contributions from Delegates of the following countries: Belarus, Germany, Norway, Azerbaijan, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Portugal, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom and Iceland.

The participants of the roundtable underlined, that population ageing is a phenomenon that is found in many countries. It is particularly fast in Central and Eastern Europe, where longer life expectancy is combined with very low fertility levels. According to the UN projections, population ageing in Europe is the most advanced compared to other World regions. Rising share of older people in the total population is both a challenge and an opportunity for the national and international policies.

It is particularly a **challenge for the existing welfare state models** and, in particular old-age pension systems. Providing adequate and sustainable pensions requires stable and far-reaching policies. These include frequently not very popular, but necessary steps such as reducing access to early retirement and prolonging working lives. As it was underlined by the Luxembourgish delegate, reforming welfare models should take into account not only fiscal sustainability, but also ensuring dignity, human rights and social goals. One of the policy directions mentioned during the discussion was **smoothing employment-to-retirement transitions**, through provision of more flexible working hours and flexible retirement options for workers, who are getting closer to retirement ages. For example, the Fuller Working Lives Strategy in the United Kingdom includes, among others, removal of the default retirement age, flexible working and private pension flexibilities to offer new opportunities to phase retirement. Flexible pensions, including possibility of combining part-time pension with part-time work were also introduced in Germany, Norway and Portugal. Mandatory retirement was also removed in Belarus. In Switzerland, incentives to retire from the labor market

prematurely, both in our public pension system and in the mandatory occupational pension scheme were eliminated.

During the discussion, it was highlighted that meeting these challenges requires focusing on efficient policies and services. Such policies should follow several assumptions.

First, **ensuring good health of older people is a must**. This includes focusing on prevention and early intervention to avoid long-term sick leaves, disabilities and early withdrawal from labour markets. Protection of mental health is needed to meet the growing risk of mental problems. Last but not least, preventive occupational health measures are also important, including also ergonomic support at workplaces. Participants in the panel discussion mentioned many national initiatives in this area, for example: “fit2work” in Austria, age-related risk assessment in steel and automotive industries in Germany. Health policies should also take into account rising share of older people among health services consumers. For example, recently in Moldova, palliative and geriatric services were expanded.

Second, it is worth using **new technologies to have more efficient and affordable services**. A good practice of Scottish Telecare Programme shows that using technologies can speed up the access to early intervention and save significant resources. Using internet and mass information helps to disseminate information on the jobs available for older workers in Russia.

Third, it is important to **remove barriers and fight stereotypes** in order to support active ageing of citizens. This should be done by continuous efforts to raise awareness on the potential of the older generations. People in ages 50 and over are becoming larger and larger share of population. Therefore, their contribution is becoming more and more important for sustaining the development of national economies.

Fourth, the **quality of living and working of older people** should be at the heart of the national policies. This includes adjustment to the individual needs and requirements and developing age-friendly environment, at central, regional, but most importantly local level. Healthy, safe and accessible workplaces are an important condition for ensuring good conditions for longer working lives. Promoting intergenerational age management and creating jobs for older workers among employers is another policy area that was mentioned by discussants from Austria, the United Kingdom, Germany and Moldova. Moldova supports entrepreneurship programmes targeted at the elderly. Active ageing at work is also promoted in Slovenia. Developing conditions to use the knowledge and expertise of older workers is one of the activities undertaken in Russia.

Fifth, policies should focus on **untapping the potential of older generations** by their enablement and social investment. Lifelong learning policies, focusing on the development and upgrading of skills at all ages help to improve the quality of human capital to off-set the quantitative loss caused by population ageing. Skills that are up-to-date are important for prolonging working lives. Europe as well as individual countries are facing significant challenges in this respect. This includes ensuring the development of necessary basic skills, but also digital skills. Policy initiatives in this area were mentioned in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Norway, Azerbaijan, Slovenia, Russia.

Finally, the **gender perspective** is crucial – women live longer and they constitute a high share of older citizens. Getting the policies right for their needs and requirements is important. Women more frequently play important roles as carers of their children, grandchildren and, more and more frequently, their older parents and other family members. Improving equal opportunities should focus on promoting more equal sharing of care responsibilities. Recently, Moldova introduced changes in the Labour Code that grant fathers access to paternity leave to care for their newborn children.

Participants in the panel discussion underlined, that **population ageing is also an opportunity**. Older people in many countries have a lot to share with others. This includes their social engagement, through voluntary work and active participation in local communities. Furthermore, the silver economy can contribute to the economic growth. There are new jobs and new sectors developing to meet the needs of the older people as consumers. This also means that new jobs are created for people in all ages. This second demographic dividend is an opportunity, particularly in the more developed countries. For example, in Austria, the new programme targeted for creating jobs for older people in local governments and non-governmental organisations is aimed at improving administrative support and services for older people as well as creating social networks.

Longer working lives and encouraging older workers to stay at the labour market is not at the cost of younger generations. **Generations do not compete** on the labour market or in any other area; their skills are in many areas complimentary. Population ageing leads to shrinking working-age populations and there is a room for everybody to have a job. Experience of older workers can be matched with the enthusiasm of the young ones. ICT literacy of the youth can be matched with the practical experience of the seniors. Learning from each other is the best way to use this potential. The right-based approach to all generations should be also respected. The inter-generational equity also means that the most vulnerable at all ages should be cared for and protected. Fighting with discrimination of older people is one of the important policy areas, among others, in Russia.

Integrated policies also mean **integrated actions of different stakeholders**: governments and policy makers, social partners, non-governmental organisations, researchers at different levels: European, country, regional and local. At the European level, initiatives such as recently adopted European Pillar on Social Rights support adequate recognition of principles concerning equal opportunities, adequate income and inclusion of older people as well as people with disabilities. Engaging with local businesses and communities to encourage and support older workers was mentioned, among others, by Austrian and the UK delegates. In Belarus, social centres for older people are established at local level.

The importance of demographic change needs international cooperation. Therefore, participants also supported upgrading the Working Group on Ageing to a regular sectoral UNECE Committee on Population.