

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address you on behalf of the European Commission. I want to thank the Austrian Government and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe for their invitation.

This conference has two aims — first, to take stock of progress over the last five years in the Regional Implementation Strategy of the Madrid International Plan. And secondly, to agree on priorities for action for the coming years.

The European Commission has been involved in the Madrid process since the outset in 2002. We have built up close, productive working relations with the UNECE Secretariat, and the issue of population ageing has been high up our agenda.

Within the European Union, most policy instruments to implement active ageing strategies are in the hands of the Member States. But what the European Union can do is encourage the Member States to tackle the problems and get them to work effectively together.

What we have done and are doing to foster active ageing has been to offer better opportunities for it through various policies and funding programmes. My aim today is to outline some of our major policy initiatives and plans for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is no coincidence that 2012 is both the tenth anniversary of the United Nations' Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity.

In the European Union, making an issue the subject of a "European Year" is a way of raising awareness among the general public and triggering action by policymakers and key stakeholders.

The 2012 European Year promotes active ageing in three areas — **employment, participation in society, and living independently**.

In practice it means fostering an active-ageing culture that includes older people, rather than excluding them.

The European Year also seeks to change attitudes to ageing, challenge the understanding of what it means "to be old" and "to grow old".

It aims to highlight older people's untapped potential and the contribution they can make to society.

And as the draft Vienna Ministerial Declaration emphasises, for active ageing policies to become a reality, we need to promote social inclusion and participation by older people, and combat discrimination against them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The time was ripe for a European Year on active ageing, because as you will all be aware, the European Union is at a demographic turning-point.

With the baby-boom cohorts beginning to retire in large numbers, we are starting to feel the impact of population ageing.

Over the next 30 years, the EU working-age population should shrink by 1 to 1.5 million a year, while the number of people 60 and over will increase by about 2 million a year¹.

Demographic change in Europe poses a major challenge for our welfare systems and for solidarity between generations. It increases the burden of pensions and care for a growing number of retired people on a shrinking working-age population — at a time of severe unemployment too.

This is one of the issues tackled by the Europe 2020 Strategy — the EU's growth strategy, which seeks to harness innovation, improve education and skills, and consolidate Member State finances.

Europe 2020 sets various targets, including a 75% employment rate for people aged 15 to 64 and for lifting 20 million people out of poverty by 2020.

Active ageing policies in the Member States are crucial to meeting those targets. Coupled with pension reforms, they will also help reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion in old age.

However, adequate and sustainable pensions depend on good jobs and a balance between time spent in employment and time spent in retirement.

This means raising the effective retirement age and seeing how to improve retirement income through better access to safe and more cost-effective supplementary pensions.

Following European Commission recommendations, many EU Member States have now raised the retirement age in line with the rise in life expectancy, curbed opportunities for early retirement and increased incentives to work longer. And this has borne fruit.

Since the crisis started, what we see is a reversal of the trend towards early retirement in the European Union. Older workers have actually done rather well during the current recession, and their employment rates have improved slightly.

But there is still scope for doing more. Across the European Union, the percentage of those employed in the 55-to-64 age group ranges from around 30% in Malta and Slovenia to 70% in Sweden.

Extending working life therefore goes hand in hand with efforts to meet the Europe 2020 employment rate target and balance budgets. It means not only encouraging people to stay on the labour market longer but also improving older workers' employability.

[European Innovation Partnership]

Leaving aside a lack of adequate income, poor health and frailty are major factors that put older people in risk of social exclusion.

To address them, the first **European Innovation Partnership** launched by the European Commission focuses on active and healthy ageing. It seeks to increase EU citizens' healthy lifespan by two years by 2020.

Improving the health of EU citizens as they grow older will relieve pressure on health and social-care systems, and will harness our older people's growth potential.

One of the crosscutting actions in the European Innovation Partnership will focus on age-friendly environments — an idea based on the World Health Organisation's age-friendly cities scheme.

[Combating discrimination]

I mentioned that one of the European Year's aims is to change attitudes towards older people and fight negative stereotypes — or "ageism", which is discrimination on grounds of old age.

EU anti-discrimination legislation bans discrimination on grounds of age in employment, including vocational education and training. And most discrimination cases heard by the Court of Justice of the European Union actually concern **age** discrimination.

Age discrimination is often coupled with discrimination on other grounds, such as gender, race or disability. Over 32% of people aged 55 to 65 say they have some disability. So an effort is therefore needed to enable the elderly and persons with disabilities to take part in everyday life.

One step in this direction is to improve accessibility. To remove barriers to people with disabilities in the physical environment, transport and information and communications technologies, the Commission has undertaken to consider regulating.

It is planning to present a **European Accessibility Act** later this year to establish a European framework for accessible goods and services.

The objective is to improve access to goods and services for persons with disabilities and the elderly on the basis of a "design for all" approach.

The initiative will be business-friendly and is likely to include provisions on accessibility in public procurement and on the harmonisation of accessibility standards at European level.

[Following up the European Year]

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are now approaching the last quarter of this European Year. Clearly, it is too early to assess its impact on policy developments in the Member States, particularly at local and regional level.

But the Year has certainly mobilised a wide range of stakeholders and showcased many new initiatives to promote active ageing and strengthen solidarity between generations. It has elicited commitments for further action from the Member States.

Several Member States have seized the opportunity to launch major national initiatives to promote active ageing.

We need to build on the political momentum generated and ensure there is proper follow-up. The Commission is keen to support the Member States and stakeholders through various initiatives.

First, in conjunction with the Member States, we are finalising a set of **guiding principles for active ageing**. They will lay down guidance on improving the conditions and opportunities for active ageing.

We hope they will be endorsed by the Social Affairs Ministers in December under the Cypriot Presidency.

Second, to measure progress in active ageing, we also are working with the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the European Centre in Vienna on developing an **active ageing index**.

It should give us an indication of the untapped active-ageing potential of both women and men in each country. There will be a presentation of the index, which is work in progress, at a side event this afternoon.

Third, the European Commission plans to issue an open call for proposals in 2013 to support the Member States in developing **comprehensive active-ageing strategies**.

At our conference in June on "Good governance on active and healthy ageing", there was broad agreement on the need for public authorities at various levels and across different policy areas to work closely together on designing effective, comprehensive strategies for active and healthy ageing.

We will be happy to support this and ensure that countries can benefit from each other's experience with integrated policy-making for active ageing.

[Conclusion]

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European Year has spurred the EU Member States to step up their efforts to promote active ageing. They have come up with actions and entered into commitments.

This has meant they have also stepped up their efforts in connection with the UN Madrid process.

I trust that this conference will give a further boost to active ageing.

Thank you.