

Report on the First Ministerial Panel of the UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing

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The panel demonstrated strong commitment of the represented countries (Armenia, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Lithuania and Slovakia) and the European Union to adapting their societies for all ages. Panellists mentioned the comprehensive programme documents at national and EU levels, but concentrated mainly on the concrete actions and their outcomes. Several panellists emphasised that the future prosperity of our societies greatly depends on the success with promoting active ageing. All in all, there is wide recognition that active ageing policies bring benefits of to the individuals that they are targeting and to the societies as a whole.

This report first refers to the comprehensive policy documents and actions, followed by a summary of the issues and activities raised in the panel's two focus areas of (1) promoting longer working life and maintaining work ability and (2) promoting participation, non-discrimination and social inclusion of older persons.

Comprehensive approach, international coordination

The keynote speech focused on the European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity, which is raising awareness among the general public and triggering action by policymakers and key stakeholders in EU Member States. It promotes active ageing in three areas — employment, participation in society, and living independently – and aims to highlight older people's untapped potential and the contribution they can make to society. The European Commission's follow-up activities to the European Year include the development of a set of guiding principles for active ageing, development of an active ageing index together with UNECE and the European Centre in Vienna, and from 2013 onwards, supporting the Member States directly in developing comprehensive active-ageing strategies.

With United Nations support and based on a broad range of ageing-related studies, Armenia has developed and adopted a national strategy and action plan on ageing and social protection of older persons. In Lithuania, the Strategy of Overcoming the Consequences of Ageing guides government policy and in Bulgaria, actions are guided by long-term national strategies on demographic development and active ageing.

Promoting longer working life and maintaining work ability

All panellists spoke about **labour market policies** that aim at encouraging employees to work. The frequently mentioned policies include tax and other incentives to employers to employ older persons, opportunities for flexible transition from work to retirement, as well as raising the retirement age. Specifically, France highlighted its generation contract policy that motivates enterprises financially to keep older and hire younger workers whereby the older workers tutor the younger ones. The Bulgarian Human Resource Development Operational Programme has also involved of older persons as mentors. The described policy measures also included legal provisions to prevent lay-off of pre-pension-age employees in Belarus.

Several panellists (Belarus, Canada, Lithuania, Slovakia) mentioned specific support to older people in finding a job. Lithuania is organizing subsidised employment or self-employment and supports local employment initiatives.

All panellists emphasised the importance of providing **training** to older workers that would allow maintain their employability. Life-long learning is an important component in national strategies and action plans. Lithuania has elaborated EU structural support projects in this field.

Countries have taken steps to reform their **pension systems** to enhance their sustainability, for example by increasing required contributory periods, limiting early retirement options and increasing the retirement age. Canada has eliminated the mandatory retirement age, allowing those who wish to continue working to remain in the labour force. The Armenian pension reform introduced a savings component in the pension system.

Some countries (Armenia, Belarus) referred to their efforts in improving income security of older citizens and preventing their poverty. Countries where the pension system and social programmes provide good income security for senior citizens, such as Canada, still have the challenge to ensure sustainability of their pension and social security systems as the population continues to age.

The labour market policies and pension reforms have led to a reversal of the trend towards early retirement and to some improvement in older workers' employment rates in the European Union. The Targeted Initiative for Older Workers in Canada has been particularly successful in increasing older workers' employment.

Promoting participation, non-discrimination and social inclusion of older persons

Most countries have adopted legislation prohibiting age-based **discrimination**. On the level of the EU, such legislation bans discrimination on grounds of age in employment, vocational education and training. Age discrimination often appears coupled with discrimination on other grounds, such as gender, race or disability in particular, requiring efforts to enable also persons with disabilities to take part in everyday life.

The European Commission is planning to present a European Accessibility Act to remove barriers to people with disabilities in the physical environment, transport and information and communications technologies, and to improve access to goods and services for persons with disabilities and the elderly based on a "design for all" approach.

Several panellists focused on efforts towards ensuring **access to information** by people of all ages at today's digital age. These took the form of providing training voucher schemes for those over 50 offer participation in digital competence and foreign language trainings (Bulgaria), projects encouraging active internet use by providing training and easy access to computers in libraries (Lithuania), as well as web sites as a central resource for information and initiatives relating to seniors, their families, caregivers and service organizations (Canada).