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Second Expert Panel Report

'Participation, Non-Discrimination and Social Inclusion of Older People'
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Population ageing has a deep impact on social development through educational institutions, labour market, social protection, public health, long-term care and intergenerational relations. However, active ageing is a focus of modern political concepts not just due to social changes but due to the changing opportunities of long-term living communities as well. This includes opportunities for older people to continue working, to stay healthy for longer time and to participate in public life, particularly, through volunteering. Active ageing also prevents discrimination of elder generations.

Public and individual objectives of active ageing may change through the life. Active ageing in the middle age is mainly associated with extending period of economic activity and employment whereas in the retirement age it is rather associated with active participation in volunteering, in political, social and community life. It is very important, especially in extreme old age, to ensure non-discriminatory access to social and health services. The policy of active ageing aimed to ensure both high quality of individual life and social welfare can be implemented by various means.

Such implementation should take into account multiple dimensions of the process of ageing which manifest themselves in both risks and opportunities. In this context one can hardly overestimate the role of the mass media which are to give wide coverage of the diversity of ageing and old age. Increasing life expectancy among both men and women and potential narrowing of gender differences can be found in any age. And this can foster behavioral changes among men and women in different periods of their lives, for instance, activation of women in the labour market and increased participation of men in the domesticities. The expansion of age frames in education which started earlier already gives some beneficial effects observable within the life of one generation. But there are various examples of contributions to active ageing in middle and elder ages. Particularly, one should note the spread of standards of the so-called 'healthy life-style', encouragement of volunteering. Studies confirm that intensification of volunteering activity often helps to improve health and facilitates social integration.

Active ageing policies require adequate tangible and mental foundation, transformation of social infrastructure, etc. Various comparative studies, however, demonstrate that the expansion of social support system, for instance, through employment protection, pension system, health care and life-long education, enhance opportunities for active ageing and make them available to more older people.

And though different means of social support are deployed in different economies, the governments may ensure that comprehensive effect is achieved. Encouragement of participation and social inclusion of the elderly may also help in enhancing their chances to actively participate in social life.

Given very diverse needs and capabilities of older people, as well as their life goals and behavioural patterns, one can hardly speak about any universal recipes. One can and should speak about reviewing and summarizing best practices of different countries and communities in the development and successful implementation, which is even more important, of policies adapted to ageing issues. One should note that the participants of the panel discussions not just reflected upon theoretical issues of inclusion of the elderly into social life but also gave various examples of successful practice in the countries of the region, and not only in the richest and democratic ones.

As knowledge and skills quickly become ‘obsolete’ given that there is no training and re-training system for senior working-age people this inevitably limits the opportunities of senior people to find (or even to retain) a job. Therefore the panellists repeatedly noted the importance of education, especially life-long education, in order to secure competitive ability and demand for elder people in the labour markets.

Quite good health is, of course, a prerequisite for active participation in public life, including employment. However, one can be quite healthy but hypochondriac and this will be an insurmountable barrier to inclusion. Therefore it is essential to form and to maintain positive mood among elder people. The experience of different countries in the region demonstrates that among the diversity of ways to include the elderly into social life volunteering plays a special role. Participation in volunteer movements fosters maximum use of the available capacity of both the society and individuals.

In addition to the rights of senior people focus should be also made on the recognition of their obligations such as obligation to maintain health and ability to work, professional and general knowledge, prevention and/or overcoming of dependency mentality and apathy. It is very difficult to help someone who does not want to accept such help and this is not just about financial aid or any services. At the same time, the motivation to continue labour activities is directly associated with qualitative attraction of such activities and the feeling of being in demand.

While avoiding discrimination of any population groups the society must eradicate any cases and possibilities of age discrimination. The panellists emphasized several times that for this it is essential that the government, both central and local, interacts with civil society institutions. It is vital to avoid any manifestations of intergenerational conflict between those who have reached retirement and those who are entering the labour market, between pensioners receiving pension from the pay-as-you-go pension system and those who make contributions for mandatory pension insurance. Ultimately, this determines the attitude of the society both to the ageing process and to old employees. It is insufficient to extirpate any forms of discrimination in the legislation; the manifestations of the so-called ‘everyday’ discrimination by employers, colleagues, neighbours, etc. are equally and sometimes even more important.

Every one should be definitely ensured with ageing in dignity. And it is not just about the area of gainful employment. Expertise and social competence are as important in fostering social progress as labour productivity. Incredible as it may seem but the contribution of elder generations into human, humanitarian and social capital is often several times larger than the contribution of equally large young generation.