

Ministerial Conference on Ageing

“Ensuring a Society for all ages: Promoting quality of life and active ageing”

Panel “Promoting participation, non-discrimination and social inclusion of older persons”.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY QUALITY OF LIFE AND WELL-BEING IN OLD AGE

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INTRODUCTION

The world of the twenty-first century is experiencing an extraordinary revolution in longevity. During the latter part of the 20th century, life expectancy has increased by about 20 years, and is expected to extend a further 10 years by 2050. It must be admitted, however, that, in spite of everything, there has not been a true democratisation of longevity. Is it not a fact that while the world, especially the Western developed world, has succeeded in adding years to life, it has not yet succeeded in adding life to years?

Do we really have an equal opportunity to a healthy longevity? Is it a myth to say that older persons really experience aging as a time of fulfilment? Are our societies full of man-made barriers and prejudices, as a result of which we are putting one age group against the other? Are we fooling ourselves when we speak of A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES?

In many developed countries, social policy analysts in the field of ageing tended to concentrate more on what can be termed as the "burden of dependency" that old age is believed to entail. In the past, a number of countries, in so far as meeting the needs of their older citizens were concerned, were more preoccupied with meeting their "humanitarian" needs and issues. Ageing populations were becoming victims of professional models of care.

The welfare programmes adopted by various governments were aimed more at protecting and caring for the older members. They were based upon the assumption that "*society has a major responsibility to provide basic social welfare and support for all persons*". Social policy analysts in the field of ageing tended to concentrate more on what can be termed as the burden of dependency. Older persons were often portrayed as: dependent individuals, lacking social autonomy, neglected, and a burden to the producing world.

Very little emphasis was put on the participation and contribution of older persons in the very developmental process of their countries. Such a strategy resulted in creating a rigid age differentiation, a dependency syndrome of older persons and, worse still, their marginalisation. They contemplated a system which was to a large extent restricted to physical comfort and medical care. Hardly any emphasis was made on how to integrate the growing population of older persons. Ageing, which is a natural phenomenon, had been rendered into A PROBLEM.

To counteract this, an urgent need was felt for a radical change of perspective breaking the policy of segregation of older persons and replacing it with a strategy of participation and involvement. We need to have a new philosophy of ageing. We need to do away with our self-made barriers and obstacles towards older persons. The central focus of policy must be the integration of older persons into society. They want an increasing say in their lives. They want to be empowered to solve their own problems.

NEW PHILOSOPHY OF AGEING

The attitude of old age being a problem to society must not only be challenged but it must be eliminated. Older persons must be enabled to participate in society to the greatest extent possible. A positive image of older persons should be promoted eradicating all negative stereotypes and attitudes leading to the segregation of older citizens. In order to create a healthier and more active population of older persons, ageing should be regarded by one and all as an opportunity to be utilised. Moreover, one cannot ignore the fact that the approach to these issues should not be treated in isolation. It should rather form an integral part of an over-all national development planning programme of each country.

Older persons must be made aware that, as an intrinsic part of their society, they do not only have rights but also duties towards their society and their fellow co-citizens. Their rights include those to live independently and with dignity. Their duties include their remaining active in their society, sharing their wisdom and experience and adapting themselves to change.

A number of decisions have to be taken with the co-operation of every social institution, be it the State, Non-Governmental Organisations, the community, the family members and last but not least, the older persons themselves. Each has a very important role to play in ensuring a sustainable development for the older population.

It is imperative to promote policies and programmes that support active ageing, which is the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age.

A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES

The promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms are essential for the active participation of older persons in all aspects of life and for the creation of A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES. This encompasses the goal of providing older persons with the opportunity to remove whatever excludes or discriminates against them

Successful ageing will only occur when an older person's personal dignity, sense of belonging and self worth are maximised. This can only be brought about by combating any form of discrimination based on age and by promoting solidarity between generations.

The Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging, strongly emphasised the fact that, while every society has a duty to assist those older persons who are in real need of support, it should equally explore the possibilities of utilising and benefiting from the varied resources of older persons. *"The aging population constitutes a valuable and important component of society's human resources"*.

However important the role of the State and that of Non-Governmental Organisations, it is equally important that older persons themselves actively participate and contribute to the very developmental progress of their

country. Older persons should also be regarded as contributors to and agents of a country's developmental effort and not as mere beneficiaries. This was precisely what was reiterated a number of times in The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. The first of the three Priority Directions precisely deals with the subject of older persons and development.

No less than nine issues (the highest number in the whole document) were raised to ensure the implementation of this first Priority Direction. All had the underlying principle that older persons should remain integrated in society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being, and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations.

“Older persons must be full participants in the development process and also share in its benefits. No individual should be denied the opportunity to benefit from development”. The expectations of older persons and the economic needs of society demand that older persons be able to participate in the economic, political, social and cultural life of their societies. In this regard, the empowerment of older persons and the promotion of their full participation are essential elements for ACTIVE AGEING.

We should not only promote the active participation of older persons in society by identifying and promoting opportunities but we should encourage, support them and also manifestly appreciate their positive contribution to society. In so doing, we are helping older persons to maximise their feeling of self worth. This is what is meant by Solidarity between generations.

The media need to be utilised better to combat ageism by making the public more aware of the contributions of older persons while highlighting the positive aspects of ageing. It should disseminate information about the fact that ageing is a natural phase in one's life cycle. It is very important to have older persons themselves involved in the planning and running of the media programmes. They are the best agents of social change. Moreover, through such programmes, older persons can still continue playing their traditional role of being transmitters of the cultural patterns and values, traditional aspects and folklore of their society.

CONCLUSION

Population ageing has become a world-wide phenomenon. Moreover, it has not only come to stay but, it will become more felt and acute with the passage of time. Its repercussions are so wide-ranging and manifold that they can only be ignored at a tremendous cost to society.

Although the social involvement of older persons is a matter of personal choice, obstacles exist which could reduce their inclination to participate. Attempts need to be made to foster such participation and to remove any obstacles preventing it. Such measures could include eliminating unjust age-related distinctions, and creating social networks, and information campaigns.

The phenomenon of ageing is neither a problem nor does it bring about any crisis. It is seen as such only by those who look at the older persons as mere receivers. What the older persons of tomorrow will experience during their lives is impossible to determine or control. But the manner in which they will come to terms with their experiences and with themselves is a bit more amenable to improvement.