



## 13th Annual Meeting of the UNECE's Standing Working Group on Ageing (SWGGA).

### Presentation of Joint Programme on Ageing.

**Alanna Armitage, UNFPA Regional Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia**

### Talking Points

Chair, madame moderator, distinguished delegates, partners and colleagues,

Congratulations to UNECE and thanks for the invitation to the 13th Annual meeting of UNECE's Standing Working Group on Ageing and joining this formidable group of experts.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to present a new regional initiative that tackles many of the issues that the previous panelists, the Independent Expert, Claudia Mahler, Alana Officer from WHO, and Astrid Dentler from the EU that UNFPA together with UNECE, WHO/EURO, OHCHR and HelpAge International launched last month on 1st October, the International Day of Older Persons.

The programme, titled '***Building forward better in light of COVID-19: Upholding the rights and dignity of older persons through health, social care and enabling environments in Europe and Central Asia***' is a result of deep concern and intensive consultations among the five partners who at the outset of the pandemic realized that the UN and civil society at country level needed to strengthen coordinated support to national efforts to scale up action for older persons.



It was conceived at the time when across Europe, from east to west, north and south, the unimaginable tragedy was unfolding right before our eyes – that the pandemic was disproportionately affecting older people in terms of incidence, severity and mortality and that care homes for older people were becoming the hotspots of Covid-19 infections.

Residents of long-term care facilities were accounting for [up to half of coronavirus deaths](#) in Europe. In addition, it was apparent that already existing neglect, poverty, social exclusion and isolation – was exacerbated because of the pandemic.

As the full extent of the crisis became visible in spring, the United Nations Secretary General issued a [Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons](#) where he underscored the imperative of protecting the human rights of older persons and responding to their specific needs. United Nations Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams approached were seeking support to better serve the countries in these critical times.

In May this year UNFPA, WHO EURO, and Help Age International organized a joint online event '*Promoting Visibility and Inclusion of Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities during the COVID19 Pandemic*', which provided resources and avenues for promoting the visibility and inclusion of older persons during the COVID-19 response. One of the outcome's of this webinar was a clear call for additional support.

And it was within that context that our UNFPA Regional Office, WHO Europe, UNECE, OHCHR, and HelpAge International - five partners whose mandates include working on ageing and older persons --- joined forces and developed a joint initiative to scale up efforts in supporting country covid19 responses.



Our collaborative action is focusing on three principle areas:

- **First**, and most immediately, to enhance **preparedness and emergency response** to mitigate the risks for older persons during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This implies underscoring the importance of bringing the needs and vulnerabilities of older persons to the forefront of public health action so the deaths in this population group can be prevented and the suffering can be mitigated.

- **Second**, to support the **delivery of person-centered integrated health and social care for older people** both during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of the demographic and epidemiologic change in Europe and Central Asia to ensure ageing with dignity.

- And **third**, to contribute to **changing the narrative** about older people, to promote their human rights and to create participatory and enabling environments. We must challenge ageism, recognize older persons as the full participants they are in society, and listen to their voice.

I'd like to stress that this is not a joint UN programme in the traditional sense. It is really meant to bring our existing UN regional assets together in support of national leadership through our UN country teams. At the moment, we are intensifying support to the following countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine.

Through the partner agencies WHO, UNECE, OHCHR and HelpAge and UNFPA, we also have a wealth of technical capacity and independent technical advisors to the joint programme, some of whom are also online with us now.

Although the programme just started in October, I'd like to give a few examples of the programme in action



In Serbia, based on the request of the Ministry of Social Welfare together with the Ministry of Health, WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF undertook an assessment - focused on long term care institutions.

As a result of this review 24 measures were identified and defined within 5-priority areas in order to further improve performance of social care institutions and enhance related inter-sectoral cooperation. IN close collaboration with both Ministries, next steps are being defined.

Here I would also like to note our appreciation for the work done by the EU in our region, and particularly in Serbia, where we are working with the EU to promote intergenerational cooperation and solidarity. EU's interest in the subject matter and its plans related to pooling together the Green Paper on Ageing and Vision Paper on Rural Populations are taken into consideration as key complementary processes. The Serbia example points to the many opportunities for the EU and UN to join forces and do joint advocacy to influence social policies in the region.

Another example is around addressing the isolation and loneliness older persons have been experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic (that the IE spoke to) in Moldova, many young volunteers are engaging with older persons in different districts of the country and jointly they are relieve their social isolation and have the opportunity to exchange life stories.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, support for healthy ageing has included development of physical exercises for older persons broadcast on television every morning. The on-going implementation of a TimeBank brings together youth and the older persons where the two groups support one another in the areas of their expertise or ability.



Future evaluation of the regional programme will be important so that we can learn lessons for intersectoral actions to uphold the rights and improve the lives of older persons.

In conclusion,

Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. It is our hope that this crisis, and the horrifying effects it has on many older people, will come to be a turning point for how we value and care for the older members of our society.

The spirit of our regional joint action is to address the urgent, immediate needs, but also to use it as an opportunity, as its full title suggests, to build forward better and create more enabling environments for older people across the region.