

Statement by Mr Sven Alkalaj
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Secretary of the United Nations
Economic Commission for Europe
at the
UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing

Opening of the Ministerial Segment

Vienna, 20 September 2012

Mr Federal President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

Today, our conference is proceeding to a new stage, gaining new momentum from the participation of many ministerial level delegates. It gives me great pleasure to welcome all the new delegates who have joined us and to welcome all of you here to the high-level segment of the conference.

High level of representation — importance of the issue

I am pleased to note that a great number of delegations to this conference are led on the ministerial level. I take this as an indication of the great importance that governments attach to appropriate policy responses to the ageing of our populations. I hope that the direct personal experience that you will gain in discussing ageing-related matters here today will help you in pursuing the appropriate policies in your countries.

After the debates of government experts yesterday, we are now looking forward to the ministerial panel discussions. I trust these discussions will demonstrate a strong political will to tackle the issues of ageing in which all countries of our region are united.

Broad base of stakeholders

It is the governments that have committed to implement the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. But there are many other stakeholders whose contribution to a society for all ages is crucial. In this spirit, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe has been fostering the involvement of non-governmental organizations and the research community throughout the inter-governmental process of follow-up on the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action.

As you know, both the non-governmental organizations and the research community held their respective forums here in Vienna. Today, we will hear the conclusions of their deliberations. Moreover, in less than an hour, we will witness a panel discussion between ministers and civil society representatives.

On the international level, UNECE remains committed to the close involvement of stakeholders in the policy discussion on ageing. I trust you agree that this involvement greatly enriches our debate in the conference and is an important condition for success in achieving our common goal of a society for all ages.

Broad theme

Today's ministerial panels will evolve on the theme of promoting quality of life and active ageing. Policies that promote quality of life and active ageing touch on very different issues, such as, for example, combating age discrimination in the labour market or ensuring affordable care for people with different care needs.

However, as you know, the designing and implementing of any ageing-related policy requires resolving of the various competing priorities in different domains. A horizontal view is needed, where policies from various domains are discussed in terms of their interactions. Through its comprehensive coverage of issues and its emphasis on the mainstreaming of ageing across policy areas, the UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid Plan of Action provides the framework for taking such broad comprehensive view.

United Nations and its regional commissions: the necessary platform

We believe that the United Nations can contribute a lot to the tackling of universal issues with complex implications, such as population ageing. I am pleased to highlight again that the first time when ageing was put on the political agenda as one of the most salient developments of our times, was organized on the platform of the United Nations here in Vienna 30 years ago.

In the United Nations system, the regional commissions, of which UNECE is one, are the main organizers of the exchange of experience and discussion of ageing-related policies and programmes. At UNECE, this is carried out by the intergovernmental Working Group on Ageing. The proposal to establish such working group was presented at the previous UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing held in León, Spain five years ago. It gives me great pleasure to highlight the strong involvement of national experts in this Working Group. We believe that its activities have helped you to translate the broad international policy framework to specific actions that make a difference in the quality of life of your countries' citizens.

Such international work strongly relies on partnership and mutual support and we hope this spirit will continue and gain further strength from this conference. UNECE is grateful to the European Commission, the United Nations Population Fund, the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the European Centre for Social Policy and Research and the International Institute on Ageing for continuing constructive cooperation,. I would also like to thank the Federal Government of Austria for hosting this Conference and for the warm hospitality here in Vienna.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, so far in this conference we have heard of many success stories about progress towards achieving a society for all ages. This should make us even more aware of the challenges in sustaining the good practices and policies in the context of the continuing ageing of population. The challenge in implementing the Madrid Plan of Action remains a big one.

On behalf of UNECE, I would like to ensure you our commitment to carry on our work in assisting you — our member States — in implementing the Madrid Plan of Action.

Finally, I wish you to make the best of the opportunity that the Conference provides for discussing the different facets of ageing and for identifying policy responses that are consistent with the opportunities and constraints of our societies. I firmly believe that this Ministerial Conference and its Declaration will strengthen our commitment and recharge us with new energy for further efforts towards societies for all ages.

Thank you for your attention.