

Contribution of older people to sustainable development

HelpAge International submission to the 12th session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing

Question 1.C. Good practices

Meaningful participation of older people and civil society in policy making is essential to strengthen older people's voice and agency in decisions that affect them and to fulfil the 2030 Agenda's pledge of leaving no-one behind. The UNECE guidance note, drafted by HelpAge, identifies good practices at the national level and aims to support policymakers and civil society actors in developing inclusive stakeholder engagement and participation processes. Enabling factors and key actions include, for example, embedding older people and civil society in all stages of the policy cycle; convening spaces for the participation of older people; and strengthening civil society and ageing networks.¹

¹ UNECE (2021), *Meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking: Designing a stakeholder engagement and participation process*, Guidance Note at <https://unece.org/population/news/unece-calls-meaningful-participation-older-persons-and-civil-society-policymaking>. Also see HelpAge International, *HelpAge Voice Framework: an Introduction* and HelpAge International's Voice Training Toolkit at <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/society-for-all-ages/voice/>

Question 2. Challenges faced by older people

Ageism, age discrimination and exclusion of older people

Governments and other duty bearers do not sufficiently consider or value older people's contributions to sustainable development.² Ageist stereotypes are reflected in the invisibility and lack of an older persons' perspective in development policies and practices. In addition, government action fails to take into account the diversity of older people as a group.³

For example, rural populations are ageing, and the proportion of older farmers is significant and growing. However, the prevailing and over-simplistic view in development labels older farmers as unproductive and unable to adopt new technologies and practices.⁴ Older people also face ageism and age discrimination in access to employment and work opportunities, skills development and education. Age limits on bank loans and other financial services limit older people's financial autonomy and prevent them from starting or expanding their own businesses.⁵ This in turn exacerbates ageist assumptions of older people being a burden to their families and society.

"It's perceived by so many people that older people have no ability to perform their tasks and that they're outdated." 71-year-old person, Tanzania

"We are prohibited from getting credit or micro-finance because we are older women. They believe we are too old and might die any time. Are younger people not dying too?" 69-year-old person, Nigeria

Intersecting challenges

Many older people experience intersecting challenges related to discrimination, poverty, displacement, social isolation, violence and abuse, based on their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, religion, and disability amongst other factors.

Older women are overlooked in development programs, and their contributions to societies through informal and precarious work remain unrecognized and undervalued.⁶

² UNDP, HelpAge International and AARP (2017), *Ageing, Older Persons, and the 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development*, New York, UNDP.

³ Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons (2016), UN Doc. A/HRC/33/44, § 119.

⁴ HelpAge International (2014), *The ageing of rural populations: evidence on older farmers in low and middle-income countries*, London, HelpAge International.

⁵ HelpAge International (2018), *Freedom to decide for ourselves: What older people say about their rights to autonomy and independence, long-term care and palliative care*, London, HelpAge International.

⁶ Report on "The human rights of older women: the intersection between ageing and gender" by the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, UN Doc. A/76/157; Age International; Age International (2021), *Older women: the hidden workforce Access to economic justice*, London, Age International.

“There seems to be a belief by our leaders that older women cannot participate in development projects.” Group discussion, Zimbabwe

Older women also report family members taking their income or savings and being denied the right to use their income and property as they wish.⁷ They even become targets of witchcraft accusations, leading to exclusion, extreme violence and even murder.⁸

“My in-laws and society started to discriminate against me after the death of my husband. They took my husband’s land and property and compelled me to leave my village.” 62-year-old woman, Nepal

Lack of a comprehensive legal framework on older people’s rights

Older people’s contribution to development is dependent on the effective enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. More than 90 per cent of the SDGs are grounded in human rights standards.⁹ However, older people still face particular challenges as ageism undermines their status as rights holders.¹⁰

A rights-based approach to development is also lacking. The prevailing narrative in development today is that because older persons contribute to society, they “deserve” to be included. This approach denies older persons the dignity and fundamental rights that are inherent to all human beings. Governments and other duty bearers, such as private employers, have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil older people’s rights, regardless of their age and regardless of their contributions to society.

The lack of visibility of older people’s rights within the international legal framework results in weak legal protections at the national level. Most States do not have comprehensive equality legislation in place to effectively tackle ageism and age discrimination against older people in all areas of life.¹¹ Non-binding policy documents on ageing and development fall short in the protection of older people’s rights.¹² This makes the need for

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ HelpAge International, “Older people in Kenya must be protected from witchcraft accusation”, 22 October 2021, <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/older-people-must-be-protected-from-witchcraft-accusations/>

⁹ Danish Institute for Human Rights, Human Rights Data Explorer: <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk>

¹⁰ Resolution 48/3 on Human Rights of Older Persons, adopted by the Human Rights Council on 7 October 2021, *UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/48/3*. UNDP, HelpAge International and AARP (2017), *Ageing, Older Persons, and The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development*, New York, UNDP.

¹¹ HelpAge International (2022), *Towards an Age Equality Duty: Advancing Equality for Older People*, London, HelpAge International (forthcoming).

¹² Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons (2016), *UN Doc. A/HRC/33/44*, § 119.

a new UN convention even more pressing to ensure older people are not excluded from sustainable development processes.¹³

Older people' voices are not heard

Older people' voices are not heard in the drafting, implementation and review of development policies and strategies. They are not included in relevant decision-making processes. There is a lack of convening spaces for older women and men, as well as 'state-citizen interfaces' where older people can engage directly with decision-makers and platforms for older people to express their voice. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated pre-existing challenges, such as top-down decision-making structures and a general lack of understanding of older people and their needs among policymakers.¹⁴

"It does not seem that current government policies take into account the voice of the elderly." Russia

"The fact that policy and interventions for older persons is not well understood by policy-makers at national and subnational levels, is a major concern with the continuous exclusion [of older people] in development, humanitarian and now COVID-19 responses." Africa region

For older people to be the 'central subject' of development more needs to be done to support their autonomy in all aspects of life, and their choice and control over the services they may need, rather than being the object of policies designed so that others do things to or for them or make decisions on their behalf.¹⁵

There is a need to go beyond formal inclusion of older persons. There is a need for substantive age equality in development. "Ensuring that no one is left behind requires more than listing older people as another vulnerable group; it requires the meaningful involvement of older people in data collection, decision making, design and implementation."¹⁶ It requires re-shaping power structures, as well as ensuring older people's right to education, and the enactment, effective implementation, and enforcement of comprehensive equality laws at the national level.¹⁷ It also requires

¹³ HelpAge International (2020), *Ageing and the SDG's: Key messages to ensure age-inclusive policies*, London, HelpAge International.

¹⁴ HelpAge International (2021), *Are older people being heard? The impact of COVID-19 on older people's ability to exercise their voice*, London, HelpAge International.

¹⁵ HelpAge International (2020), *The rights of older persons: A review of national ageing strategies in the Arab region*, London, HelpAge International.

¹⁶ David Dodman, Director of Human Settlements Group, International Institute for Environment and Development in HelpAge International (2016), *Ageing and the City: making urban spaces work for older people*, London, HelpAge International.

¹⁷ UNDP, HelpAge International and AARP (2017), *Ageing, Older Persons, and The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development*, New York, UNDP; The Equal Rights Trust (2019), "No One Left Behind: An Equal

awareness raising, adequate investment, increasing capacity and technical expertise of States and other stakeholders.

Question 3. Data, statistics and research

There is a serious **data gap** regarding older people and development. Out of a total of 53 indicators identified as important to older people across the 17 SDGs, age-disaggregated data is currently not reported for 38 of those indicators.¹⁸ **Ageist bias** also affects collection of data and research that underpins development policies and strategies. This prevents their contributions from being recognized and valued.

A recent HelpAge study on disaggregation of SDG indicators on older people confirms these gaps and ageist bias. Limitations of household surveys (e.g. age caps, gaps in coverage, limited information on intrahousehold dynamics) and the subsequent production of statistics (e.g. highly aggregated analysis, unavailable micro-data) mean that experiences of older people are almost invisible in data. The analysis of labour force surveys shows that older women and men with and without disability, continue working into their 70s and 80s. Yet, a common definition of 'working-age population' continues to be those aged 15 to 64,¹⁹ thereby reinforcing the stereotype that people aged 65 and over are economically inactive, dependent, and frail.²⁰

Question 5. Mechanisms for Redress

Even where participation of older people is included in development policies, implementation remains limited and complaints mechanisms non-existent or inaccessible. There is a need for a comprehensive **legally binding instrument** at the international level that protects older people's right to redress. Moreover, participation in the implementation, monitoring and reporting mechanisms established by a Convention, would provide a way for older persons to hold their governments to account.²¹

At the national level, Governments must establish institutions, procedures and rules which enable individuals who were subjected to ageism and age discrimination to **secure**

Right Approach to Sustainable Development", Written Statement to the Human Rights Council Intersessional Meeting for Dialogue and Cooperation on Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

¹⁸ Titchfield City Group on Ageing (2021), Third Technical meeting (forthcoming). For more info, see <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/citygroups/Titchfield.cshhtml>

¹⁹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines working-age as 15-64, <https://data.oecd.org/pop/working-age-population.htm>

²⁰ HelpAge (2021), *Breaking through the 60+ ceiling: assessment of disaggregation of the SDGs indicators on older people using household surveys*.

²¹ UNECE (2021), *Meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking: Designing a stakeholder engagement and participation process*, Guidance Note.

effective remedy.²² States have an obligations to ensure access to justice for victims of discrimination.²³ They should create a system of enforcement institutions, laws and procedures which are meaningfully and equally accessible and effective in practice.²⁴ In addition to ensuring that enforcement bodies are established and that they are properly funded and resourced, of good quality, independent, impartial and accountable, states must ensure that these bodies are accessible.²⁵

²² International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Art 2(3); Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31 (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13), 2004, para, 15.

²³ See, for instance, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 6* (CRPD/C/GC/6), 2018, para. 31(b), and 73(h); Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concluding Observations on Nepal (E/C.12/NPL/CO/3), 2014, para. 11(f).

²⁴ See, for instance, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 2(3)(b); Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 6* (CRPD/C/GC/6), 2018, para. 73(h); Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31 (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13), 2004, para. 15; Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 20* (E/C.12/GC/20), 2009, para 40.

²⁵ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *General Recommendation No. 33* (CEDAW/C/GC/33), 2015, para. 17.