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AGE Platform Europe submission on Focus Area: Sustainable Development

This short answer is submitted in reply to the call of the Chair of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG) to NGOs. AGE Platform Europe (AGE) has ECOSOC status and is accredited to the OEWG since 2012.

As the largest European network of self-advocacy organisations of older people, our position aims to reflect the situation at EU level on behalf of the 40 million older citizens represented by our members. Our contribution is based on written answers received from organisations of older people in several EU Member States and webinars open to all AGE members. It also builds on the AGE barometers of 2019, 2020 and 2021.

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1. What are the legal provisions, policy frameworks in your country that recognize older persons' right to participate in and contribute to sustainable development? This could include, but is not limited to:

- a) ensuring that relevant human rights (in particular the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the right of access to information, and the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association) are protected and implemented;**
- b) protecting and enhancing civic space and collaboration with civil society that represents the voices of older persons in sustainable development;**
- c) good practices to ensure older persons' participation in, and contribution to sustainable development.**

At European level, there are general provisions on the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. Article 25 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights aims to guarantee older people's right to participate in social and cultural life. Article 23 of the Revised European Social Charter aims to 'enable elderly persons to remain full members of society **for as long as possible**, by means of: a. adequate resources enabling them to lead a decent life and play an active part in public, social and cultural life; b. provision of information about services and facilities available for elderly persons and their opportunities to make use of them. Paragraph 10 of the 2014 CoE recommendation mentions that older persons should have the possibility to interact with others and to fully participate in social, cultural and education and training activities, as well as in public life.

All Sustainable Development Goals targeted towards 'all' individuals are advanced by the improvement of the situation and rights of older persons, including reduction of poverty and social exclusion (SDG1), participation in the labour market (SDG8), improved health (SDG3) and many others. However, older persons are often excluded from the monitoring of such targets. As an example, in the EU, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan proclaims a target to reach 60% participation in training in a given year for 'all' adults by 2030, but the indicator measuring its attainment only considers people until 65.

Older people participate and contribute to development in all areas of life: economically through employment, as entrepreneurs, and consumers as well as with unpaid informal care provision; socially by volunteering (formally and informally) and engaging in associations and the life of their communities and, politically by taking part in elections, engaging in political parties and social movements. The role older people play as investors into the community is often forgotten. Small and individual financial investments add up and contribute to overall development. The 'Tidy Towns' initiative in Ireland which focuses on local communities improving the appearance and biodiversity of their area features considerable participation from older persons.



Volunteering is a key aspect of how older people exercise their right to participate. Volunteering keeps older people connected to their local community as well as aiding the sustainable development of their area or country. Many older people choose to engage in small local clubs, schools, and neighbourhood associations, as well as NGOs/CSOs and other such operations. Mainly local and regional frameworks support volunteering, but volunteering organisations are calling for national frameworks to support them with capacity-building and training, as well as funding. Without these, volunteering may not be accessible for more vulnerable groups of older persons, such as older persons with low incomes, older migrants, older persons with disabilities and so forth.¹

At EU level, the European Solidarity Corps only supports volunteering by younger persons. Older volunteers can access some possibilities for support in the Erasmus+ programme which provides for funding to develop projects in adult education among staff (development of resources and guidelines, etc.) and mobility for adult learners. It remains to be assessed as to how far this can be used to support senior volunteering.

2. What are the challenges faced by older persons for the realization of their right to contribute to sustainable development at national and international levels?

The biggest challenge noted by AGE members was their governmental representation at the national and international level. Some states have ministers for older people in their national governments, but these positions are often junior ministerial positions and can often be seen as tokenistic. Several EU states group their minister for older persons under the department for health and this has a negative effect on how older people are seen/perceived. It promotes the view that older people are sick, vulnerable, or unhealthy and this can also affect their participation in all areas.²

Several states have councils of older people who come together to discuss issues they face, with the aim of providing recommendations and advice to their local, regional, or federal governments. However, the reach of these councils depends on the municipality; in some regions they are supported and respected but in others they are not embraced³. Some

¹ AGE has compiled extensive testimonies and developments around older people's participation in education and life-long learning, volunteering and political participation in the [2021 AGE Barometer](#), covering 15 UNECE member States.

² This also means that competences might be fragmented between ministries, with ministers for social affairs responsible for pensions, ministers for employment for labour-market participation of older persons and ministers officially responsible for older persons only taking on an unclear set of 'other' attributions

³ In Greece, older people are mainly consulted on issues concerning pensions or health related matters rather than issues surrounding participation and development. In Germany, there are older persons councils represented at both the local and regional level but not federally. In the Netherlands, older persons councils

councils have consultative status but not the right to make decisions as others may have. Councils and their participation in governments need to be regulated and supported within states.⁴ Challenges in the representation of older persons' councils also exist for groups such as nursing home or care facility residents, Roma and other vulnerable groups who are typically underrepresented, if at all.

There is a general lack of support by member states for international representation and dialogue relating to older persons. AGE members highlighted the need for organisations of/for older persons to be included in conversations regarding global issues, not just those concerning older persons. Older persons or a representative should be included in official delegations at key international meetings. Currently, no EU Member State, nor the EU itself, includes older persons' representatives in their delegations to the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing.

AGE members have highlighted that both the 65+ and under 30 age groups that are underrepresented in policy making, the highest represented age group is that of the 40-55s. The digitalisation of information about programmes, campaigns and in many states, the entire consultation process, makes it harder for some older persons to participate in political decision-making on an equal footing, limiting their right to active citizenship.

Volunteering

There are several challenges faced by older people when it comes to volunteering. Many AGE members previously noted the lack of formal status for volunteers, citing that this and having governmental backing would be of great benefit. In some states there are formal barriers to participation in volunteer activities, for example, volunteers in pre-retirement in Denmark risk losing certain benefits. Other barriers noted by AGE members included the existence of disabilities and stereotypes relating to gender, ethnicity amongst others. While it is not a formal barrier, older adults with lower educational achievements are underrepresented in volunteering. In a few cases age limits in insurance policies, impede older people from being engaged in volunteering.

have almost disappeared, with organisations working predominantly at local level, being consulted by the ministry of health on an ad hoc basis.

In Bulgaria, advisory councils for older people come together to collaborate on issues but there is no further progress at national level. Recommendations are made, written down and laid out, but support for change relies heavily on which party is in power.

⁴ Good practices exist where older people's councils are statutorily established by regional (some regions in Germany) or national law (in Denmark, local and regional senior citizens' councils are required by national law). They also might be supported by funding for organisations which can train and federate senior citizen councillors nationally.



National frameworks for volunteering would provide the necessary tools to engage and support older persons at the local level, so they can participate and develop the selves whilst in turn aiding development.

AGE has noted that “It is often reported that there are no policies to support volunteering”. Some supports that AGE has recommended previously include

- Logistical support (i.e., mobility services, access to spaces, materials)
- Fiscal support in the form of deduction of material or non- material support to NGOs from taxation
- Financial subsidies
- Volunteer training

Accessibility and Opportunity

Mobility and accessibility are necessary for older people to access their right to participation. Opportunities and challenges to exercise such rights differ in rural and urban areas; this presents difficulty in policy creation as a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable⁵. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted these issues faced by older persons.

Education and the Workplace

Lifelong learning opportunities available in many countries are linked to the workforce, and often exclude pensioners. An example is the proposed EU Council recommendation on individual learning accounts, which provides only for learning credits during working age – although education is a right at any age and has particular benefits in older age. Once you reach retirement age, it becomes increasingly difficult to access courses and programmes as there is no governmental support for upskilling in the way it exists for other groups such as the unemployed. Further education opportunities for people beyond retirement age are not valued as it is assumed that they will not be formally participating in the workforce again. Even when in the workplace, the training of older workers is not targeted by policies and is often neglected despite their high risk of unemployment in a case of recession and job loss. Older workers currently show the lowest rates of participation in training. AGE members highlighted that access to training needed to be improved, as well as the exposure and reduction of the discrimination which may prevent older workers from receiving training. In the aim of sustainable development, the upskilling and retraining of workers in many areas is key and older workers should not be left out of this process.

3. What data, statistics and research are available regarding older persons’ contribution to sustainable development?

⁵ [COST ROSEnet ActionPolicy2.qxp Layout 1 \(rosenetcost.com\)](#)

Volunteering statistics are not assessed regularly enough, as the most recent figures at EU level date from 2015. These showed that 20.3% of persons aged 65-74 and 13.3% of persons 75+ partake in formal volunteering. This figure drops to 18.9% for all persons 16+. In Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Slovenia, over 30% of 65–74-year-olds volunteer. However, in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Croatia, Cyprus, Portugal, and Slovakia, less than 10% of this age group volunteer. In Ireland, almost half of persons aged 70+ volunteer with 30% volunteering on a weekly basis⁶. The King Baudouin Foundation found that one third of volunteers in Belgium are aged 60+. Within this, older persons are more likely to be in positions of leadership or administration within volunteering. The study also uncovered that most older persons volunteer in socio-cultural areas and that a major area for volunteering includes care to other older persons.⁷

Older person's participation is extremely valuable for development in industry, especially those with experience and expertise in their area. Mentorship programmes are in place throughout Europe already. The German based Senior Experten Service is a voluntary organisation which pairs businesses with older persons who have knowledge/experience in their industry, having assignments in over 160 countries⁸. There however could be more support to encourage such mentorship activities on a wider scale.

Over 20% of persons aged 65-74 participate regularly in formal volunteering⁹. Older women often engage in unpaid care work, mainly for younger family members or their partners and thus support the working generation in their work life. The contribution of older people during the covid-19 pandemic cannot be understated, as many individuals came out of retirement as doctors, nurses, and other health/care-related staff to help their nations fight the crisis.

Active Citizenship- In 2015, 11.3% of people 55-64 and 6.2% of people 75+ were exercising active citizenship¹⁰ compared to 12.1% of all peoples aged over 16+. This figure rises to over 20% in Sweden, France, Netherlands, and UK, but lowers to less than 10% in other states,

⁶ [Report Over70sContribution.pdf \(tcd.ie\)](#)

⁷ This emphasises the lack of accessible and affordable formal long-term care services and has its other expression in the high share of older persons – especially older women – providing unpaid care work, which is not considered as formal volunteering. The right to long-term care has been explored in other sessions of the OEWG.

⁸ [Senior Experten Service \(SES\) - Home \(ses-bonn.de\)](#)

⁹ [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁰ Defined as participation in activities related to political groups, associations or parties, including attending any of their meetings or signing a petition.

Romania, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, Lithuania, Belgium, Latvia, Czech Republic, Italy, Hungary, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Poland, Estonia, and Austria.

Equality and non-discrimination

4. What measures are being taken to eliminate ageism, ageist stereotypes, prejudices and behaviours that devalue older persons' contribution to sustainable development?

While the EU has the fight against discrimination on the ground of age as one of its core Treaty principles, the policy area of fighting ageism is not thoroughly developed. The legal framework is limited to the equal treatment directive in the field of employment, and a directive on equal treatment on the ground of age (and intersecting discrimination) is blocked by member states since 2008. The EU Green Paper on Ageing and the related consultation opened an opportunity to build a strategy around ageing that could have been based on non-discrimination and human rights and AGE has proposed an Age Equality Strategy in this context.¹¹ However, there does not seem to be a comprehensive follow-up process to the Green Paper.

The 2012 European Year on Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations has shed a light on older persons' potential and contributions, but its longer-term outcomes have been limited to some awareness-raising.

Some individual projects to tackle ageism in different contexts exist and build a growing body of knowledge on how to address it. For example, the EU funded project 'Best Agers' in the Baltic states published a series of recommendations on how to encourage intergenerational dialogue in the workplace. This included the creation of age-mixed teams, showing appreciation for older workers and engaging in mentoring practices. A once off workshop or training course is not enough to break down and eliminate age discrimination, an integrated, pro-active strategy is needed.

AGE members point out that at an individual level, participation would be better fostered by Member States through the establishment of 'service points' for persons without access to the internet, to develop transport arrangements to reach public and essential private services, as well as mobile units that bring these services to sparsely populated areas. The establishment of councils of residents within residential care facilities to allow for participation in the immediate environment of older persons is needed.

¹¹ Cf https://age-platform.eu/sites/default/files/AgeEqualityStrategy_FINAL.pdf. An Age Equality Strategy would be similar to strategies existing on other grounds of discrimination such as racialisation, gender, disability, LGBTI status. Age is the only ground mentioned in the treaties not covered by a dedicated strategy at EU level.

Remedies and Redress

5. What mechanisms are necessary, or already in place, for older persons to lodge complaints and seek redress for denial of their right to participate in and contribute to sustainable development?

The right to participate in society is not easily enforceable in practice, due to the lack of explicit provisions and the fact that it is often seen as an issue of social policy, rather than an issue of rights. As explained in the first question, this right is often guaranteed ‘as far as possible’ and not ‘on an equal basis with others’, which makes it even harder for individuals to claim their rights. The lack of a legal framework at EU level covering age discrimination in access to goods and services is an important barrier to accessing justice in case of denial of older people’s right to participate in sustainable development. Older people count among the groups that are least aware of their rights under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the available redress mechanisms¹². They are also the least likely to complain in case of violation of their human rights. Under-reporting is related to the fact that older victims are less likely to know their rights and how to file a complaint, Ageism is also internalized (UN Global Report on Ageism, 2021) making older people less likely to claim their rights and accept practices that are discriminatory or are violating rights. Measure s aiming to address systemic ageism are needed, but also support for individuals and representative organisations to increase rights awareness, legal literacy and access redress¹³.

¹² [Special Eurobarometer 487b](#), 2019

¹³ On this, see also our input on the normative elements of the right to access justice

