

The United Nations and the Question of Ageing

Before all the generations, especially the younger one, can effectively contribute to making our world truly a society for all ages, they must learn about the impetus behind the International Year for Older Persons 1999. To be informed is the prerequisite to making a difference. Learning about the circumstances that propelled the United Nations into taking action on the important issue of world ageing populations is a good place to begin.

Thinking about Ageing

In the past 50 years, the General Assembly of the United Nations has addressed the position of the elderly or aged or older persons in society on numerous occasions. The International community first took up the question of global ageing at the United Nations on the initiative of Argentina in 1948. At that time the General Assembly adopted resolution 213 (III) concerning a draft declaration on the rights of the elderly.

In 1969 the issue was again raised by Malta. The result was a reference to the need to protect the rights and assure the welfare of the aged in article 11 of the Declaration on Social Progress and Development, resolution 2542 (XXIV). In 1973, the General Assembly adopted resolution 3137 (XXVIII) entitled “Questions of the elderly and the aged.” In addition, the World Population Plan of Action, adopted by the World Population Conference of 1974, contains a provision urging all Governments to consider the implications of changing proportions of older persons in the population in their development policies.

In recognizing that longevity was becoming one of the major challenges of the twentieth century, in 1978 the General Assembly decided to deal with the issue in a broader manner by convening a “world assembly on aging.” This was the first occasion that this expression was used. In 1982 member states of the United Nations gathered in Vienna for the world’s first meeting to address what has been termed the “silent revolution:” an increase in longevity of 20 years since 1950 and the most dramatic demographic change the world has witnessed.

United Nations Takes Action

The International Plan of Action on Ageing emerged from the World Assembly on Aging. It discusses the broad implications of ageing for individual life and for societies. The International Plan reaffirms the full and undiminished application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the ageing. It sets forth 62 recommendations for action dealing with the situation of older persons in the areas of: health and nutrition; protection of elderly consumers; housing and environment; family; social welfare; income security

and employment; education; and data collection, analysis and research on issues affecting older persons.

This document was created with the aim to “strengthen the capacities of Governments and civil society to deal effectively with the ageing of populations and to address the developmental potential and dependency needs of older persons.” The recommendations it contains are not binding on member states, but rather are an international commitment to action that should be taken in this area. Member states are not liable, but are urged to take the steps recommended to prepare for the immense increase in older persons that is occurring in every country.

Review and appraisal of the International Plan is performed by the Division for Social Policy and Development of the Economic and Social Council every four years (1985, 1989, 1993, 1999). Member states are invited to report on their activities in incorporating the International Plan into national strategies and policies. The review and appraisal is carried out in self-reporting and voluntary manner. This means that the Division reviews and comments upon the information provided to it by individual member states.

In 1990, further recognizing that world attention needed to be drawn to the global increase in the number of older persons, the General Assembly designated 1 October as the International Day for the Elderly, later renamed the International Day for Older Persons. The Day has become an annual event around the world, with various activities organized in commemoration of contributions of older persons.

During this year, the United Nations also launched a global information campaign on ageing and called for a set of global targets on ageing for the year 2001. This was a proactive response to the observation that the broad and ideal goals of the International Plan had not been met thus far. The global targets reflect a pragmatic approach to implementation of the International Plan. They anticipate cooperation between Governments, United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to set national targets, to integrate ageing into development plans, support programmes dealing with older persons, improve research on ageing, include ageing in international fora, and establish a global network of senior volunteers. The Centre for Social Development is the coordinator and focal point of this UN strategy.

United Nations Principles for Older Persons

In 1991, the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Principles for Older Persons to provide a broader framework for action on ageing. The Principles are framed as 18 entitlements that older persons “should have.” They are organized into five areas relating to the status of the older person: Independence; participation; care; self-fulfillment; and dignity.

Independence

1. Older persons should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and health care through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help.
2. Older persons should have the opportunity to work or to have access to other income-generating opportunities.
3. Older persons should be able to participate in determining when and at what pace withdrawal from the labour force takes place.
4. Older persons should have access to appropriate educational and training programmes.
5. Older persons should be able to live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preferences and changing capacities.
6. Older persons should be able to reside at home for as long as possible.

Participation

7. 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.
8. Older persons should be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities.
9. Older persons should be able to form movements or associations of older persons.

Care

10. Older persons should benefit from family and community care and protection in accordance with each society's system of cultural values.
11. Older persons should have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness.
12. Older persons should have access to social and legal services to enhance their autonomy, protection and care.

13. Older persons should be able to utilize appropriate levels of institutional care providing protection, rehabilitation and social and mental stimulation in a humane and secure environment.

14. Older persons should be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives.

Self-fulfillment

15. Older persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential.

16. Older persons should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.

Dignity

17. Older persons should be able to live in dignity and security and be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse.

18. Older persons should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution.

Governments are encouraged to incorporate the UN Principles into national programmes whenever possible. The objective of drawing up the UN Principles was to provide a set of guidelines on entitlements of older persons to complement the existing International Plan of Action on Ageing. Like the International Plan, the UN Principles are not binding on member states, but are forward looking strategies for governments to cope with the increase of older persons in their countries.

Governments are not obligated to include the UN Principles in their national agenda. The UN Principles are guidelines to assist governments in dealing with demographic change.

The expectation is that governments will understand the importance of implementing the UN Principles and will develop strategies to ensure that older persons are receiving those entitlements that the United Nations has indicated they should have.

Towards A Society For All Ages

Observance of the International Year for Older Persons during 1999 is the next stage in the evolution of the United Nations programme on ageing. The Secretary General of the United Nations has established a conceptual framework for the year with the following four dimensions: the situation of older persons; the life-long individual development;

multi-generational relationships; and the relationship between development and the ageing of the population. Many Governments and NGOs are celebrating IYOP by hosting a number of events and initiatives during this year.

“Towards A Society For All Ages” was conceived as a theme that would promote an age-inclusive society and express the idea that ageing is a multidimensional, multisectoral and multigenerational issue. The United Nations envisions IYOP as a starting point for the review and initiation of long-term policies to address the impact of the increase in the world’s ageing population.

Source: <http://www.unac.org/iyop/unquest.html>