



*European Economic and Social Committee*

# EUROPEAN YEAR OF ACTIVE AGEING AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS 2012

CONCLUSIONS OF THE EESC COORDINATION GROUP



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COORDINATION GROUP FOR THE  
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## **INTRODUCTION: THE EUROPEAN YEAR 2012 AND THE EESC**

The European Year 2012 was, to a certain extent, a framework for raising awareness of the contribution that older people make to society and mobilising stakeholders and policymakers at all levels to promote active ageing and solidarity between generations.

To coordinate its activities during the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012, the EESC established a Coordination Group of fifteen members, chaired by **Renate Heinisch** (Group III) and **Xavier Verboven** (Group II). The co-presidents and members of this Group represented the EESC in over 35 events related to the European Year.

The Group decided that its activities would include:

- Ensuring EESC participation in all major events during the Year, both in Brussels and throughout the Member States;
- Organising hearings or joint hearings on various issues related to the European Year;
- Functioning as a study group to prepare the SOC own-initiative opinion on "The involvement and participation of older people in society";
- Promoting the Year through the EESC's publications, website and events;
- Drafting a summary report of the Year's activities.

The Group worked completely independently, having chosen its own topics to develop during its mandate. Through a series of public hearings, it sought to open the discussion to representatives of employers, trade unions and non-governmental organisations on how to respond to the needs of older people, address challenges created by the ageing of the European population and value older people's contribution to society.

Each event held by the Group has been devoted to a special topic related to the Year:

- 16/4: Hearing on "Changing images of age – changing the learning paradigm" & Hearing on "Growing old in good health"
- 5/6: Hearing on "The involvement and participation of older people in society"
- 20/6: Joint conference with the LMO on "Activation of senior citizens" & "Humanising working conditions for senior workers"
- 11/9: Hearing on "Information and communication technologies (ICT) and active ageing"
- 3/12: Final conference to draw conclusions from the European Year 2012.

The EESC believes that, to achieve the aim of fully integrating older people into society, the actions initiated during this European Year must have some continuity and be linked to those of the recent and forthcoming European Years (namely those on Poverty, Volunteering and Citizenship).

## **ACKNOWLEDGING AN AGEING POPULATION**

Acknowledgement and appreciation of senior citizens' role in our society is vital, and protecting their dignity and fighting against their discrimination is also key. Senior citizens must not be seen as a homogenous group in terms of working abilities, social abilities and health and social needs. Therefore a "one size fits all" approach is not appropriate.

What is needed is more in-depth knowledge on the demographic dynamics of ageing (health, life expectancy) as determinants of activity and well-being in old age. There is also a need to research problematic areas of ageing and demographic change, such as health maintenance and rehabilitation, extension of working time, requirements for an increasingly self-responsible life, learning to live a

long life, the impact of the increasing mechanisation of life and further issues arising from the demographic and technological changes produced in European society.

Older citizens have a range of specific needs. Targeted measures should be taken with regards to infrastructure, the supply of adequate health care and care services, as well as participation in the economic, political and social life. Financial security and access to activities such as learning, employment and voluntary work are essential for their participation in society.

Goods and services should be adapted to serve the needs of senior citizens. It is important for seniors to have easy access to shops and other key places such as post offices and banks. Easy access and affordability of public transport is also an important aspect for seniors in order to maintain their independence. The design of newly built houses should take the needs of the elderly into account in order to ensure safe and independent living.

The extra necessities for senior-friendly goods and services will also stimulate growth in production and employment. Services of general interest are an essential means of enabling older citizens to exercise their rights in practice. They must be developed.

To meet the needs of older people and achieve more solidarity between generations in practice, the Committee has recommended a series of initiatives, such as:

- creating a "European Alliance for Active and Healthy Ageing" alongside the "European Alliance for Families";
- moving from programmes such as "Seniors in Action" and "Youth in Action" to an EU programme dedicated to "Generations in Action";
- appointing demographics officials in national ministries, who are responsible for drawing up plans for seniors (like the "federal plans for seniors" in Austria) and reports on the situation of senior citizens;
- creating ministries for generations and/or, in city and town councils, developing services dedicated to meeting the needs

of generations, instead of having separate youth and senior advisory services;

- organising a European convention of mayors to deal with demographic change (like the one organised for sustainable energy);
- supporting mentoring programmes for seniors at local and regional level.

## **GROWING OLD IN GOOD HEALTH**

Healthy ageing cannot be achieved through a single initiative. It is a comprehensive strategy which requires a range of actions and approaches at individual (lifestyle), organisational (management) and societal (policy) level.

Healthy ageing requires healthy nutrition, physical and cognitive activity, and social participation. Reliable health care entails medical care (especially geriatric) and rehabilitation, adequate care services, advice and information on patient rights and on prevention measures, technical support systems, and formal and informal social support groups.

There is in particular great need to support research for better prevention, which includes improving clinical trials of medicines for older people, increasing health education across all age groups and developing "patient competence" (health literacy and in particular "learning for a long life").

As the crisis has impacted on the adequacy of social protection, on preventive health and on long-term care, it has consequently affected the quality of life and dignity among older people. Health and social services should not be considered as a cost but rather as an investment in people and in cohesion. Europe must make better use of Structural Funds to achieve this and the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework should provide sufficient funds to support both health care and social services.

## **CHANGING THE IMAGE OF AGE**

Clichéd and unrealistic images of age are still deeply rooted in our society. Prejudices about older people must be challenged because they affect their self-esteem and their social contribution. Firstly, it is necessary to avoid treating people with ages ranging from 65 to 100 as a homogenous group. Secondly, the language used by society and media to describe the increased number of older people is inappropriate. Thirdly, the perception that older people are economically inactive is unfounded.

There is a need to promote a new, positive image of old age, which acknowledges achievements of older people and promotes respect for old age.

Central, regional and local governments have a major responsibility for combating age discrimination. European and national media campaigns should be launched to improve the image of age and put the focus on the capacity and contribution of older people.

## **RECOGNISING THE CONTRIBUTION OF OLDER CITIZENS**

Older people contribute to society from a social and economic point of view. From the social perspective, the role of older people could be described as "social glue", due to their contribution to family and communities through volunteering and participation in democratic institutions. From the economic perspective, the increase in older people should be considered as an opportunity, the so-called "silver economy".

Promoting social participation amongst senior citizens, including them more in the decision-making process and allowing them to have a say on issues that affect them would give them a much stronger sense of belonging to society.

Barriers hindering older people from fully participating in society must be tackled. Voluntary activities in an honorary capacity should be supported and institutions should open up to enable older people

to carry out more voluntary work, but not for replacing paid jobs. Older people who commit themselves in civic work may not be exploited and should be protected against any attempt of exploitation. Volunteer work should not enter in competition to paid work.

Public authorities, companies and NGOs should invite older people to stand for election, vote and take part as members in their boards. Central, regional and local governments have a major responsibility for increasing opportunities for senior volunteering and creating a framework to ensure that it remains decent. They should encourage older people to volunteer in accordance with good practice guidelines.

## **IMPROVING THE WORKING CONDITIONS FOR OLDER WORKERS**

Older people bring knowledge and experience to the job market and should not be declined on the basis of their age. A good working environment will promote psychological wellbeing for older people and encourage them to work up to the retirement age and perhaps beyond that.

In order to ensure sustainability of pension funds, older people are being encouraged to prolong their working lives. But the wide range of challenges faced by workers in different occupations urges extreme caution with regard to policies that would indiscriminately extend working life for all older workers. A popular idea amongst senior citizens is to combine partial pension and partial working time. Additionally, they avoid physically demanding work. Whatever age they do decide to retire, the transition between work and retirement should be as easy and flexible as possible.

All of this requires the removal of legal barriers for employment, the change of employers attitudes to older workers and workers' attitudes about working longer, to improve the health status and workability of older workers, to adapt their working conditions and working time arrangements, to develop their lifelong learning, to

give the right incentives in the social protection and tax systems, and to use the European Social Fund to promote active ageing in employment. Self-employment is another option, as it gives the senior citizens more control over their working hours and conditions.

Social partners face the bulk of responsibility for improving employees' working and employment conditions during the later years of their working lives. This challenge calls for innovative human resource management practices. More concretely, they should consider changes as:

- gearing the working environment towards older people, by reducing the physical demands and improving health, safety and the ergonomic qualities of their workplace;
- promoting new forms of contracts dealing with the transition period between pre- and post-retirement life, and offering legal security;
- adopting a cultural change in business geared towards promoting individual skills regardless of age.

## **PROMOTING THE INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY ON THE LABOUR MARKET, IN THE WORKPLACE AND IN SOCIETY**

Social and economic realities have shown that raising the effective retirement age alone would not be sufficient enough to secure the European social systems. Sound social inclusion policies, age diversity and intergenerational solidarity in the workplace are inevitable.

Any measures to increase the actual retirement age must not create obstacles for young people to enter the labour market. Flexible, part-time retirement for older workers combined with part-time job and part-time training for younger workers might help achieve age diversity and enable a productive exchange between the older workers' experience and skills and the younger workers' knowledge of new technologies. This is the real expression of solidarity between generations.

A stronger connection between generations in the workplace will promote the image of senior citizens and combat prejudices of ageism. Additionally, the difference in skills and knowledge between the younger and older generations is quite considerable, which helps avoid competition between generations. On the contrary, working together can bring about the opportunity to combine the knowledge of both generations and improve their social and professional lives.

Social partners, in particular employers, are especially well positioned to promote this solidarity, for instance by means of mentoring schemes.

### **IMPROVING LIFELONG LEARNING FOR SENIOR CITIZENS**

Barriers hindering older people from fully participating in society must also be tackled by establishing and developing lifelong learning programmes to prevent social isolation and increase older people's chances to take active part in a series of activities.

But the current approach to lifelong learning is still not responding adequately to the ageing society. A lifelong approach means creating a four-stage model (ages up to 25, 25–50, 50–75, 75+) for lifelong learning. Notwithstanding the needs of the younger people, training opportunities should be also enhanced for those in the third stage, and the emergence of the fourth age requires an appropriate approach to learning in later life.

Lifelong learning for seniors has a series of advantages. They are mentally and physically healthier, take better care of their health, have stronger social networks, volunteer more often, have more trust in political institutions, participate more in petitions and political discussions, have access to computers and internet, etc.

Learning environments should be as desirable as possible for senior citizens, offering courses that would relate to their interests. Life-long learning is particularly necessary for those who have low levels of education or a lack of skills. Additionally, special training courses should be offered to seniors to help them prepare for retirement, deal

with basic financial and legal matters and use the new information and communication technologies.

Central, regional and local governments, who are in charge of providing education, should ensure learning for seniors (including less privileged seniors), consult seniors about their learning needs, raise awareness for the benefits of learning at all ages, and support businesses (possibly through tax incentives) to provide continuous training for older workers.

## **MAKING TECHNOLOGIES WORK FOR ACTIVE AND HEALTHY AGEING**

The use of new technologies is increasingly gaining importance to live an active and independent life in old age. Retired people need ICT to remain connected, healthy and active. Communication software as E-mail, Skype and chat rooms enable older people to keep in touch with their family, friends, community and also meet other citizens in similar positions. The use of the Internet to shop on-line clearly has particular advantages for those with mobility difficulties.

On the other hand, the use of ICT also helps towards job sustainability. Workers of all ages benefit from new ICT skills as they help them work for longer. They also open senior citizens to the idea of tele-working. Younger generations teaching older generations about technology will improve the intergenerational relationship. And using ICT gets older citizens closer to the democratic institutions (e.g. through referendums/polls/E-government) and promotes citizenship.

One key to achieving this is to ensure maximum accessibility of software by older people adjusting it to their specific needs (sight problems, problems with sense of touch, etc.). Up to now there has been a certain resistance to use ICT in the area of health, which is due to the fact that ICT has been mainly technology-driven (instead of costumer/patient-driven). This is why patients/costumers must be increasingly involved in ICT developments affecting them.

The overall objective of the Ambient Assisted Living Programme supported by the Commission is to enhance the quality of life of older people and strengthen the industrial base in Europe through the use of ICT. This means to develop products and services for ageing well, be it at home, in the community or at work, to create a critical mass of innovation at EU level, to create markets at EU scale and to include users in these developments. This would certainly be a costly investment, but definitely worth pursuing.

ICT can have many useful functions for the service providers and the users: they improve communication, information and rationalisation. ICT makes the sector of "proximity services" (services to the home) more professional. By improving the skills of the providers, the service gains in quality; by streamlining the organisation of services, they are easier to provide and time is gained. As the majority of people working as carers are women, professionalising them is necessary to improve the service quality and to empower the carers themselves, giving them a higher purchasing power and a greater job security.

Older people need to be targeted by all information and communication technologies: e-learning, e health, e-care, e-rehabilitation, to name a few. While governments should ensure the digital inclusion and training of older people, the European Commission should promote bottom-up solutions to the challenges related to the use of ICT, but all stakeholders (mainly the social partners) must also be involved in promoting the accessibility and use of ICT.

## **ENSURING ADEQUATE, SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE PENSIONS**

Demographic and economic changes have seriously impacted the pension provision across the EU. The financial crisis has put pressure on European regulators and individual Member States to find solutions to the lack of pension provision across Europe. Most EU Member States have already embarked upon pensions reforms. The challenge for policymakers is how to tackle the challenges of an

ageing population and develop proportionate regulation to ensure pensions are sustainable.

As increasing jobs will not help low paid workers who have no savings, pension reforms must be adopted to help reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion in old age and to ensure that younger generations are not burdened by the debts of older workers.

To help Member States tackle the challenges that confront their pension systems, while, at the same, time, remain social, the following will be needed:

- to focus essentially on strengthening public pensions. Complementary retirement schemes can be useful, but their legal framework must first be improved to guarantee their safety;
- to link pension policies more closely with the labour-market, social protection provision and fiscal and macro-economic policies. These policies are interconnected and must be mutually supportive;
- to increase the revenues that fund pension systems by increasing employment, extending pension systems to all socio-occupational categories, improving the mechanisms for collecting contributions, and tackling undeclared work and tax evasion;
- to encourage a longer working life on a voluntary basis. Automatic increases of the statutory retirement age on the basis of a projected increase in life expectancy can be counterproductive, because they can lead many older workers (especially those with health problems) to opt to turn to other social security pillars;
- to use the ESF budget to support projects to improve the employment of older workers and adapt workplaces to their skills, capacities and health state;
- to use part of the European social fund set out for 2014-20 to support projects aimed at the employment of older people;
- to take action on bridging the gap in pension rights between men and women caused by the labour market practice;

- to include in the legislation mechanisms to protect pension income to guarantee that pensions stay above the poverty threshold.

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