

Executive Summary

2010 AARP-UN BRIEFING SERIES ON GLOBAL AGING

In 40 years, older people will outnumber children for the first time in history. This demographic shift makes it critical to tap into older adults' wisdom and value for the benefit of all society.

On February 2-3, 2010, AARP and the United Nations Programme on Ageing cosponsored the fourth UN Briefing Series on Global Aging. The briefing explored barriers that impede social inclusion of older adults and highlighted the value of viewing aging issues through a human rights framework. Its goal was to inform discussions at the 48th session of the UN Commission for Social Development.

Day 1: Global Health and Human Rights

Social integration is a critical strategy for addressing the demographic shift. "The perspective that one suddenly becomes old and unproductive at the age of 60 must change," emphasized Sha Zukang, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, in his opening remarks. "When older persons are included in decision-making processes, the benefits are far-reaching and extend to families, local communities and society at large."



AARP President, Jennie Chin Hansen and Josh Collett, VP of International Affairs welcome Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs for the UN

While acknowledging that much work remains, Mr. Sha celebrated global progress. A growing number of countries are developing a plan of action on aging, and there is greater recognition of the value of older workers. Governments are increasingly seeing social protection as an investment, and non-contributory pensions in developing countries are expanding. He expressed hope that the upcoming 10th anniversary of the Madrid Plan of Action would spur countries to continue their progress.

Improving the health and social status of older persons remains a key challenge and was the focus of the briefing's first panel. "The health of elderly populations influences outcomes in all of the other policy areas affected by aging," noted AARP President Jennie Chin Hansen.

She called on governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to work together on health promotion and prevention.

In her keynote speech, US Assistant Secretary for Aging Kathy Greenlee described the US systems that support older adults. The US provides seniors with a modest pension through Social Security and access to health care through Medicare.

A third system, funded by the Older Americans Act, delivers community services that support family caregivers and help older adults stay in their homes. It contributes to the balance between government, family and community that she believes is necessary to care for a growing older population.

“The Older Americans Act system is different from other US structures, because most of the money is funneled directly to local communities,” Ms. Greenlee explained. “This is very much in line with what the UN supports in terms of bottom-up development.”

Sam Halabi, J.D., a fellow at Georgetown University’s Institute for National and Global Health Law, discussed the notion of participation as a determinant of health. Many countries mistakenly think of participation only in a political context, he cautioned. What’s needed is a broader definition where people also contribute to community health projects and work toward measurable health outcomes.

Mr. Halabi illustrated this distinction by sharing lessons from Indonesia. Between 1978 and 1999, the country took a broad view of participation, implementing a national strategy aimed at providing access to an essential health care package. The central government trained local volunteers in sanitation and prevention, and directed resources toward building community health centers. As a result of these efforts, Indonesia made significant gains in health outcomes.

However, after the fiscal crisis of 1997, the government shifted its focus to political participation, creating forums where local stakeholders could set health care priorities. Under this more narrow view of participation, Indonesia’s community health centers faltered and private alternatives became unaffordable. Mr. Halabi concluded that both types of participation are important to furthering health status and social inclusion.

Intergenerational relationships are also important to social inclusion, observed Rick Martinez, M.D., director of medical affairs for Johnson and Johnson. Yet, in the United States, many older adults are reluctant to ask their family for help. He contrasted this zeal for autonomy with attitudes in other parts of the world, where interdependency of generations is highly valued.

Dr. Martinez also urged baby boomers to consider intergenerational cohesiveness when advocating for social security, tax policy and social protection. “What’s good for boomers should also bode well for the welfare of and futures of our young people,” he said.



Day 1 presenters (l-r): Jennie Chin Hansen, President, AARP; Kathy Greenlee, Assistant Secretary on Aging, United States; Rick Martinez, Director of Medical Affairs for Corporate Community Relations, Johnson and Johnson; Sam Halabi, Fellow, O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law; Josh Collett, Vice-President, AARP Office of International Affairs

Day 2: Empowerment in Aging: Human Rights of Older Persons

In welcoming participants to the second day of the briefing, Rosemary Lane, Acting UN Focal Point on Ageing, shared results from a survey of member states on how to improve implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action. “There was near universal support to focus on human rights and older persons as a priority,” she said. The UN General Assembly has asked the Secretariat to produce a report on the current status of the social situation, wellbeing, development and rights of older persons for its next session.

In keeping with this theme, the second panel focused on strengthening the human rights of older persons and including them as agents of change in society. “Existing international and regional human rights law does not sufficiently protect older people’s rights,” Ms. Hansen said. They are often denied jobs and services, subjected to abuse, and left without financial protection.

However, with appropriate policies and investment, global aging could go hand in hand with more equitable social and economic arrangements, said Sylvia Beales, Policy Manager for HelpAge International. Although human rights are often considered aspirational, their pursuit leads to a range of immediate and long-term benefits. For example, the right to economic security is a key driver in the fight against poverty.



Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona delivers keynote remarks on the human rights of older persons.

In her keynote remarks, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, UN Independent Expert on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty, argued that ensuring access to social protection is not a gesture of charity, but an obligation enshrined in international human rights law. Thus, establishing and expanding non-contributory pensions is crucial to realizing the human rights of older persons.

Ms. Carmona cited evidence that non-contributory pensions reduce gender imbalances and improve standards of living across all generations. They build family cohesion and also have wider economic benefits to the community. However, to fully realize these benefits, pensions must be designed in ways that comply with general

human rights principles: equality and non-discrimination; accountability; transparency; access to information; and participation by older people.

Ms. Carmona suggested universal pensions are more suited to a human-rights orientation than means-tested pensions, noting that several developing countries have enacted them. “Poverty in old age is not an inevitable fact of life,” she stressed.

Venus Ilagan, Secretary-General for Rehabilitation International, shared lessons learned in developing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the UN General Assembly adopted in December 2006. The convention is the first legally binding international instrument to adopt a rights-based approach to disability. “It reflects a shift in paradigm from persons with disabilities being viewed as objects of pity, to being recognized as owners of rights,” Ms. Ilagan said.

In order to advance the convention, the disability community had to learn to speak with a unified voice. To do that, the International Disability Alliance (IDA) formed the International Disability Caucus to reach

beyond its traditional membership. Today, it is broadening its network even further through the IDA CPRD Forum to support the convention's implementation.

A human rights approach offers many advantages over a charitable approach, explained Craig G. Mokhiber, Deputy Director of the New York Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It calls for active, meaningful participation by the individuals affected and places accountability on governments. A human rights approach also emphasizes nondiscrimination and empowerment in economic and political forums.

Unfortunately, older persons are one of the few vulnerable groups for which no dedicated human rights convention exists. Mr. Mokhiber believes creating one would provide a number of mechanisms necessary for elevating the status of older persons: an authoritative means for enhancing accountability; a platform for advocacy; tools for legal enforcement; a basis for international dialogue; a system of international monitoring; sources of technical cooperation; and a mechanism for complaints.

"Human rights law says that people are not to be viewed as subjects of charity," Mr. Mokhiber said. "They are rights holders with binding claims."

Conclusion

The fourth UN Briefing Series on Global Aging helped advance thinking around aging issues by highlighting the following themes:

- A base level of economic security and access to health care are critical to realizing older adults' participation in society.
- Basic social protections are not an act of charity, but an obligation under human rights law.
- A human rights framework advances aging issues by empowering older adults and holding governments accountable.
- The disability community's success in achieving a dedicated convention on human rights offers important lessons for the aging community.
- The challenges of aging are multifaceted and require the efforts of governments, businesses, NGOs, communities, families – and older persons themselves.

In closing the briefing, Ms. Hansen noted, "Our later years can, and should, be filled with the same opportunities, excitement and vitality as our younger years. That is the vision of aging and the spirit that we must carry forward in the 21st century."

For more information about the conference, please visit: www.aarpinternational.org/2010unbriefingseries or contact Jessica Frank López, Associate Director, AARP Office of International Affairs at: jefrank@aarp.org