

**UNECE – IMSERSO – UNFPA****Meeting of National Focal Points on Ageing in the UNECE Region**

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**The Special Role of NGOs in the MIPPA/RIS Follow-up**

Contribution by

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**Abstract****1. Background considerations**

- On the grounds of principles of *Good Governance, Transparency and Participation*, proclaimed by the United Nations and Member States, particularly since the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen 1995, the process leading to MIPPA and, even more, the one which produced the Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) in the UNECE Region was characterized by a strong involvement of organized civil society, in particular non-governmental organisations.
- The experience made highlighted another time the importance of associating or even integrating all relevant stakeholders in the process of assessing needs in society, in formulating appropriate policies, in reflecting on efficient strategies, in monitoring their implementation, and in evaluating the results achieved.
- By their experience at the grass root level as well as through their expertise in conceptual terms NGOs - representing directly older persons in society or advocating on their behalf or rendering services to them - have significantly contributed to the shaping of public concepts in the field of ageing and have given to policy making input as well as output legitimacy.
- Without the strong involvement of organized civil society, and in particular of NGOs, as the bridge between State and citizens, people directly or indirectly affected by policies and programmes addressing the consequences of demographic changes will not be able to fully understand, accept and support the necessary and sometimes painful decisions.
- Consequently the “Bottom-up Approach” formulated and requested by the UN for the MIPPA review and appraisal acknowledges the value and indispensable contribution of organized civil society and, in particular, of NGOs.

- It is most significant that recent documents of the United Nations strongly emphasize this issue as follows:
  - The General Assembly of the UN, in its resolution A/RES/60/135 of 2 February 2006 “*Recognizing that in many parts of the world, awareness of the Madrid Plan of Action remains limited or non-existent, which limits the scope of implementation efforts, calls upon Governments, the organizations and bodies of the United Nations system and the non-governmental community to reinforce their advocacy campaigns aimed at informing all major societal actors, including older persons and their organizations, about the decisions taken at the Second World Assembly on Ageing.*”
  - The UN Commission for Social Development, in its resolution E/CN.5/2006/L.2 Of 14 February 2006 recalls that the Economic and Social Council “*invited Governments, the United Nations system and civil society to participate in a bottom-up approach and appraisal of the Madrid Plan of Action*” and “*invites all major stakeholders, including civil society, to participate in the process of the review and appraisal and contribute to its various activities and events.*”
  - And last but not least, the Commission for Social Development concludes after a panel discussion that “*it is clear that bottom-up, participatory review and appraisal can be a tool of better decision making and improved policies and programmes. ... The social perspective they introduce provides new and essential information to policy makers and increases their understanding of actual conditions for older persons in their country. ... Encouraging active involvement ... in the review and appraisal exercises can help to overcome stereotypes and lead to greater social capital, as people connect, share experience and resources, organize networks to promote their interests and well being, and contribute to better policies.*”

## 2. NGOs participation in the process leading to RIS

- When conceiving a strategy for the involvement of NGOs in the preparatory process for the forthcoming León Conference of the UNECE it is of particular value to remember an experience which produced excellent results, recognized by both by governments and NGOs, and which has to be considered as the guiding precedent.
- In the preparation for the Regional Implementation Strategy of the UNECE Region and the Berlin Ministerial Conference on Ageing in 2002 non-governmental organizations on ageing, be they active at national or regional level, were closely involved in all major stages of the process.
- In particular representatives of such NGOs participated in the three technical expert meetings which identified the major issues to be dealt with in Regional Implementation Strategy and in the Political Declaration.
- Two NGO representatives, serving in their personal capacity, were members of the Drafting Committee preparing the Regional Implementation Strategy and five NGO representatives introduced NGO views and demands into the negotiations of the Open Ended Working Group on the Regional Implementation Strategy.

- NGOs had previously pre-negotiated their common positions during a Preparatory NGO Meeting attended by some 70 NGO representatives from major international and national networks on ageing from the UNECE region and its member states. These were then presented in a consolidated NGO contribution to the process.
- The draft of the Regional Implementation Strategy which was negotiated by the Member States of the UNECE in the Open Ended Working Group contained in an integrated form(!) the consolidated remarks and demands of the NGOs.
- At the Ministerial Conference on Ageing in Berlin in 2002 one spokesperson representing the world of NGOs in the area of ageing had the opportunity to voice the concerns of this sector in a speech which was an integral element of the plenary.
- This final contribution, even though critical about the lack of strong monitoring elements in the RIS, was highly appreciated by government representatives. In fact, it was one of the motivations of the creation of the “Task Force Monitoring RIS” initiated by the Austrian government.

### **3. Consequences for the UNECE Conference on Ageing in León 2007**

- Since the time of the adoption of the Madrid MIPPA and the Berlin RIS political conditions and public awareness in respect to population ageing have considerably changed. Nowadays politicians as well as the larger public are much more aware of the consequences of demographic change and the need to make citizens understand and accept the necessary policies.
- There is also much broader awareness that organized civil society, and in particular NGOs, play a key role in shaping appropriate policies and, equally important, in their effective and efficient implementation. Their crucial function as a bridge between State and citizens makes them a major asset for societal cohesion and good governance based on participatory democracy.
- Consequently, the preparatory process for the UNECE Conference on Ageing in León 2007 has at least to match the qualitative criteria set and so successfully experienced during the preparation of the Ministerial Conference on Ageing in Berlin in 2002. There is no way to fall behind these standards.
- This means that the importance of close involvement of organizations of older persons or working for them needs to be fully recognised in all relevant documents of technical and political nature and such non-governmental organizations be full fledged partners of governments at all stages of the preparatory process.
- In particular, NGO should be asked to contribute to the main background document for the León Conference, a representative of the NGO world should advise the drafting group responsible for this background paper, and NGO experts serving in their personal capacity need to participate in the Expert Group as well as in the open-ended Preparatory Committee for the Conference.

- Obviously the UNECE Conference on Ageing in León has to be open to NGO participation and needs to provide, at a prominent time in the programme, the opportunity to NGOs to communicate their views, concerns and visions as a crucial societal community.
- It has to be acknowledged as a “*conditio sine qua non*” that NGOs requires appropriate material and technical support in order to be able to organize themselves in a transversal manner for the process and produce consolidated positions reflecting the issues of common concern for the whole sector – and not just individual stances of different organisations.
- In concrete terms this means that there is need for an “*NGO Focal Point*” with an independent coordinator who will serve as a collector and transmitter of information and contributions as well as the facilitator of and facilitator for the organisation of two NGO events: a preparatory meeting of NGOs in Spring 2007 to prepare a common position paper for the final document of the León Conference and the already envisaged NGO Forum right before the Conference. The necessary funding has to be insured.

#### **4. And beyond the León Conference**

- Experience clearly shows that policy formulation and strategic concepts by themselves do not achieve much if there is no strong will for appropriate implementation, an effective implementation monitoring process and clear evaluation mechanisms. In the latter two again NGOs play a major and decisive role in their double role as “blind man’s dog” to advise and “watchdogs” to monitor governments and the administration in their achievements.
- As to the continuation of the regional implementation of MIPPA through RIS this means that a stable cooperation network of relevant NGOs is needed to exchange over time information, best practices and agree on joint initiatives in order to provide support to each other and to public structures responsible for the implementation of MIPPA and RIS.
- On the grounds of the outcome of the UNECE Conference on Ageing in León 2007 NGOs in the field of ageing in the UNECE region should come together once more in 2008 to examine in detail in which manner they can best put their specific knowledge, experience and capacities into practice in order to help make the commitments of Member States reality in the interest of older persons and of society at large.