

2009 AARP-United Nations Briefing Series on Global Aging

In Commemoration of the 10th Anniversary of
the International Year of Older Persons

February 3-4, 2009 | New York, NY



AARP Office of
International Affairs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commemorating the 10th anniversary of the International Year of Older Persons, AARP and the United Nations Programme on Ageing (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) organized a series of briefings on February 3 and 4, 2009. The program focused on social integration—the 2009 theme of the UN Commission for Social Development.

In 1999, the International Year of Older Persons introduced the vision of a society for all ages. Over the past 10 years, this vision has blossomed into an increasingly shared worldview on aging, noted AARP President Jennie Chin Hansen. Scores of countries have engaged in policy formulation and social planning that elevates the interests, rights, and integration of older people. Their efforts have been shaped by the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, a landmark strategy that continues to guide national priority-setting.

Yet, much work remains to fully realize the vision of the International Year of Older Persons. Data compiled and presented by the UN's Population Division indicate that the number of people age 60 and older in the world is expected to triple by 2050. There is growing recognition that enhancing multi-generational relationships improves the economics of population aging and development. In addition, countries must re-engineer their physical, social, and spiritual environments to empower older adults to fully participate in society. Both of these aims are elements of social integration.

PURSUING SOCIAL INTEGRATION

“Social integration is the process of building values, relations, and institutions that are essential for the creation of an equitable and dynamic society,” explained keynote speaker Sergei Zelenev, Chief of the UN Social Integration Branch. It enables all individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities and to contribute to society.

Protecting the rights of older people is a prerequisite for social integration, Dr. Zelenev stressed. Many developing countries have yet to enact legislative measures that ensure basic economic security, guarantee equal access to health care, and assure older people's right to participate in the decisions affecting their lives. In the developed world, ageism

tends to be more subtle, but it still results in the marginalization of older people.

Countries must move away from the mindset of thinking about aging issues and family issues separately, urged Dr. Gunhild Hagestad, Professor of Sociology at Norway's University of Agder. She noted that many policies that would benefit older people are also good for the young.

It is important to nurture a social mindset that older people are a valuable development resource, added Hilario G. Davide, Jr., Ambassador of the Philippines to the United Nations. "Countries need to empower older people to be active in society, which means giving them the space and capacities for a more meaningful involvement," he said.

PROMOTING WELL-BEING AND PARTICIPATION

In Africa, experts worry that the well-being of older people is declining due to changing family structures, urban migration, poverty, and HIV/AIDS, explained Professor Nana Apt, Dean of Academic Affairs at Ghana's Ashesi University. Yet, even amidst these challenges, grandparents continue to care for orphaned grandchildren and contribute what they can to the family financially. Professor Apt expressed hope that growing civic participation by older people would result in policies that enhance their well-being.

Perhaps nowhere is an empowerment mindset more needed than in developing regions of the world, suggested Professor Bernd Marin, Executive Director of the Vienna-based European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, affiliated with the United Nations. Many Eastern European countries are rapidly "catching up" economically. However, the diverse paths they take toward development—including the way they address population aging—could determine whether, or to what extent, such progress is sustainable. The development of Central and Eastern Europe, representing the majority of Europe's countries and population, will critically impact the UN-European region, which includes North America, Canada, and the United States.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spirituality is also being recognized as playing an important role in older adults' well-being, explained Dr. Thomas Cole, Director of the McGovern Center for Health, Humanities, and the Human Spirit at the University of Texas, USA. He cited research over the past 25 years that indicates having a sense of life purpose is positively correlated with reduced morbidity and mortality. In addition, when individuals have opportunities for life-long development, they grow in wisdom and concern for others—which benefits society as a whole.

Another part of promoting the well-being of older people is examining the economic factors that enable them to contribute to society. “The greatest risk we face from this economic crisis is that it could set back what we’ve achieved in the last 10 years,” said Dr. John Beard, Director of Ageing and Life Course at the World Health Organization.

Dr. Beard urged countries not to reverse their investments in the social sector, but rather, to learn from Asia’s proactive response to its economic crisis 10 years ago. During the crisis, South Korea chose to extend its unemployment insurance, while Thailand seized the opportunity to introduce generic substitution of medications. Dr. Beard suggested there is a window of opportunity to rethink outdated health systems and retirement policies—and enact new approaches that will empower older adults.

THE LEGACY AND OPPORTUNITY

Ten years ago, the International Year of Older Persons provided the initial contours for a vision of a society for all ages. As noted by Dr. Alexandre Sidorenko, Head of the UN Programme on Ageing, its legacy includes the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing—and all of the progress that plan has facilitated.

Today, forward-thinking countries are continuing implementation of the Madrid plan by pursuing empowerment of older people as a springboard to social integration. Those that commit to this path will find themselves well positioned for the dramatic demographic change on the horizon.



H.E. Biu The Giang, Ambassador of Vietnam to the UN poses a question to the panelists.



Day 1:
**The Economics of Aging:
Generations & Development**

INTRODUCTION

Josh Collett, Vice President, International Affairs, AARP, opens the day's briefing.



Mr. Josh Collett

Vice President, Office of International Affairs, AARP

“When you contribute to a conversation, that simple act of sharing a unique point of view permanently changes the conversation,” opened Josh Collett, welcoming participants to the third AARP-UN Briefing Series on Global Aging. He noted that through this program we and the UN Programme on Ageing hope to

facilitate a dialogue to promote the UN’s theme of creating a society for all ages.

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of 40 million members whose mission is to enhance the quality of life for all as we age, Mr. Collett continued. The organization facilitates global dialogue by partnering with governments, businesses, NGOs, and others to share ideas and best practices for addressing key issues associated with aging populations.

OPENING REMARKS

Ms. Jennie Chin Hansen
President, AARP

“Nearly 17 years ago—riding the momentum created by the UN Principles for Older Persons—Resolution 47/5 was passed by the UN General Assembly,” Jennie Chin Hansen opened. “The Resolution breathed life into the idea of a worldwide, year-long observance to recognize humanity’s demographic coming of age.” The call for 1999 to be the International Year of Older Persons, provided the initial contours of a vision for a society for all ages.

Over the past 10 years, this vision has blossomed into an increasingly shared worldview on aging, Ms. Hansen noted. Scores of countries have engaged in policy formulation and social planning that elevates the interests, rights, and integration of older people. The vision found its most detailed expression in the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, a landmark strategy that continues to guide national priority-setting on the full spectrum of aging issues.

In the most recent report of the Secretary General to the current session of the UN Commission on Social Development, the vision was sharpened through an empowerment lens. Protecting the human rights of older persons was described as central to empowering and enabling them to lead active, healthy, and productive lives, Ms. Hansen explained.

This past December, a General Assembly Resolution was passed encouraging governments to bear in mind the crucial importance of family, intergenerational interdependence, solidarity, and reciprocity. These elements are viewed as critical to social development, social integration, the realization of human rights for older persons, and the prevention of discrimination.

“The vision of the International Year of Older Persons is thriving,” Ms. Hansen said. “Every new forum on global aging seems to add nuance,

Jennie Chin Hansen provides welcome remarks at the UN Briefing Series.



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

strength, and energy to the vision.”

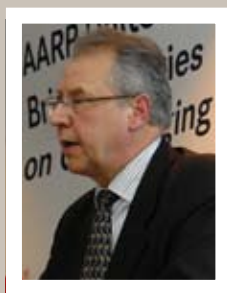
Ms. Hansen noted this year’s briefing focuses on two key aspects of the vision of the 1999 International Year of Older Persons. First, it takes the view that the quality of multi-generational relationships increasingly drives the economics of population aging and development. Second, it emphasizes the need to re-engineer the physical, social, and spiritual environments of older people so that their prospects for enjoying good health and human rights are enhanced.

“As we celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the UN International Year of Older Persons—especially in the midst of this global economic crisis—we have an opportunity to rethink some of the frames we have used historically,” Ms. Hansen closed.

PANEL

Session moderated by Dr. Jorge Bravo, Chief of the Population and Development Section of the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Dr. Sergei Zelenev provides the keynote address on older persons and social exclusion.



Keynote Speaker: Dr. Sergei Zelenev
Chief, Social Integration Branch, Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

Many contemporary social challenges can be most effectively addressed through social integration, opened Sergei Zelenev. He defined social integration as “the process of building the values, relations, and institutions essential for

the creation of an equitable and dynamic society.” In such a society, all individuals are able to fully exercise their rights and responsibilities and contribute in a meaningful way.

Dr. Zelenev emphasized that a socially integrated society reduces inequalities, promotes access to basic services such as health care, and increases the participation and inclusion of social groups, including

older persons. Unfortunately, much work remains to achieve this aim.

In the developing world, many older persons lack access to social protection schemes, are deprived of adequate health care services, and are unable to fully exercise their rights in the political process, Dr. Zelenev noted. Ageism tends to be more subtle in the developed world, but it nonetheless serves to marginalize older people.

Creating or enhancing intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion are important steps toward social integration. Dr. Zelenev defined social cohesion as the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization and conflict.

Too often, younger and older generations are at odds, with each group competing for government resources and policy attention. Instead, greater effort should be made to highlight their synergies and interdependence. For instance, caring responsibilities often take on an intergenerational dimension. There is also much that the young and old can learn from one another, and in doing so, they can help to foster a more socially integrated society.

Empowering older persons and protecting their rights is another key to achieving social integration, Dr. Zelenev explained. However, many countries have yet to enact legislative measures that ensure basic protections for older people.

Currently, at the international level, there are no legally binding documents specifically addressing the rights of older persons. Options that exist in this area regarding various legal tools need to be carefully explored. In addition, much more could be done at the national level to fight against age discrimination and the neglect and abuse of older persons.

Protecting older persons' rights is a prerequisite for social integration, but it is only a beginning. Dr. Zelenev stressed countries must also recognize

Moderator
Dr. Jorge Bravo
opens the panel.



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and appreciate older people as valued members of society.

To do so, they must combat negative stereotypes by promoting positive, yet realistic, images of societal aging and older persons. Interestingly, research suggests that when aging stereotypes are reinforced, they can become internalized.

Countries should encourage the media and others to highlight both highly functioning older persons as well as those in need of care, Dr. Zelenev urged. The important contributions older people make as workers, consumers, caregivers, and volunteers need to be recognized. And many developing countries must actively confront abhorrent, prevalent stereotypes, such as the depiction of older women as witches, which occurs in some African countries.

An additional way to promote social integration is to mainstream aging concerns into existing policy priorities, rather than treat them as peripheral issues. “Aging issues will be addressed most effectively when they are viewed in a comprehensive and integrated manner,” Dr. Zelenev closed.

Dr. Gunhild Hagestad

discusses generational issues in the quest for a society for all ages.



Dr. Gunhild Hagestad

Professor of Sociology, University of Agder, Norway

There are three parts to the theme, “Toward a society for all ages,” opened Dr. Gunhild Hagestad. First, a society for all ages does not have barriers against contact, support, and learning across youth, adults, and older people. Second, such a society recognizes that age groups are also historical generations bound by

commonality of experiences. The final part concerns the need for continuity across the stages of life.

Dr. Hagestad suggested that in trying to translate this theme, many countries have missed at least one of its components. “Over the ten years since the launch of the International Year of Older Persons, what has struck me

most is the issue of age segregation, because those barriers are very much still there,” she said.

“We cannot focus only on old people,” Dr. Hagestad continued. “The two points where the action is in population aging—the youngest and the oldest, or the bookend generations—is where we need to be.”

For most of human history, at least half of the population has been children, Dr. Hagestad noted. Now, the world is not only experiencing population aging, but also a feminization of the population. One of the most dramatic shifts is the declining ratio of old men to children in some countries. “What does it do to socialization and the continuity in male lives when boys don’t have models as to what an old man is like,” she questioned. “What happens to the telling of history when there is no ‘he’ to do it?”

Dr. Hagestad cautioned against separating discussions of the old and young. She suggested that, while the Madrid Plan had noble intentions, little has been done to consider these generations together. Similarly, very few academics do research on both children and older people.

“We talk about aging policies and family policies as if older people don’t have families,” Dr. Hagestad said. “We’re cutting off chains that are closely interconnected, and it doesn’t make sense.”

Turning to the family, which she deems as “the only age integrated institution,” Dr. Hagestad outlined three contours of modern grandparenthood. In North America and Sub-Saharan Africa, she describes grandparents as “child savers” who step in when parents are not functioning because of poverty, incarceration, substance abuse, or HIV/AIDS. Alternately, in the Nordic states, which are characterized by public care, grandparents serve as a “back up national guard.” Finally, in Mediterranean countries, grandparents are serving as “mother savers” by making it possible for mothers to work and therefore access greater opportunity.

“The vision of the International Year of Older Persons is thriving.”

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Interestingly, there appears to be general consensus on the appropriate role of grandparents. In many countries, about half of older people and adult children agree grandparents should be there for grandchildren in cases of difficulty. Other aspects of the role include encouraging adult children as parents and contributing to the economic security of the family. “A big part of modern grandparenting is to continue being a parent,” Dr. Hagestad said.

However, it is not just grandparents who are contributing in the relationship. There is also teaching from young to old, particularly in the area of modern technology like the internet and cell phones.

Dr. Hagestad suggested more research is needed on the impact of a combination of public and private intergenerational resources. “Can we make up for families that don’t have these resources because of turmoil, unemployment, or poverty?” she asked. “Can we identify countries where children have the widest access to adults independent of their families?”

H.E. Mr. Hilario Davide, Ambassador of the Philippines to the UN, addresses the importance of having older persons as participants and active members of society.



H.E. Mr. Hilario G. Davide, Jr.
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations

“The true measure of humanity, peace, justice, development, progress, and prosperity includes how the old are treated,” opened Ambassador Hilario G. Davide, Jr. “Casting away, forgetting, despising, or excluding the old is cruelty of the highest form.”

Ambassador Davide noted such treatment also violates the United Nations Charter and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular, Article 25 illuminates the rights of older persons to security in old age.

In the past 10 years, the Philippines has taken bold and positive steps to promote, protect, and enhance the rights of older members of its society,

Ambassador Davide explained. Even before that time period, the Philippines had a constitutional guarantee to protect the rights of older people.

A commitment to protecting older people is particularly important today, in light of the food crisis in developing countries, environmental and climate change issues, and the new financial uncertainties. “The common trends and challenges of today demand that we take a surgeon’s knife in assessing the differential impact these issues may have on the various segments of society,” he stated.

Ambassador Davide suggests there are three fundamental approaches that should underpin the actions of governments and interest groups. First, they must nurture a social mindset that is buttressed by government policies that view older people as a valuable segment of society and an under-tapped resource for development. Second, they must empower older people to be active and potent in society, which means giving them the space and capacities for a more meaningful involvement. Finally, they must mainstream older people in health, education, employment, labor, housing, and environmental policies by being conscious about how efforts in these areas impact their lives.

The United Nations, with help from civil society and the private sector, should become a more active platform for facilitating cooperation and exchange among countries and organizations. In particular, there is potential for cooperation around model laws and action plans, the collection and analysis of statistics, resource mobilization, and systems for monitoring progress.

“Aging issues will be addressed most effectively when they are viewed in a comprehensive and integrated manner.”

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Dr. Hagestad was asked whether her “bookends analogy” suggests that agencies dealing with children’s issues and elder issues would be better off merging or combining resources. She reiterated that the two population segments are integrally connected, noting there is currently a lot of duplication of bureaucracy and services. “Why have a senior center and a youth center separate, when both need the same art supplies and musical instruments?” she questioned. On the policy level, with respect to urban planning, she stressed, “what’s good for the young is typically good for the old.”

One participant commented that urbanization poses opportunities for integration of older people. There is the potential for them to access everything they need without having to drive a car. However, to realize this potential, local authorities need to be conscious in their planning efforts.

The discussion then turned to how to move beyond age segregation over the life course. Dr. Hagestad emphasized there is a need to create arenas where people of all ages can learn, work, and play. “This is the first time in history where the young and old are excluded from the sphere of work,” she said. “This tri-partition of life has created institutional and spatial barriers—and consequentially social and cultural barriers—between people who have much more in common than we usually think.”

Dr. Zelenev concurred, noting, “Intergenerational should be one of the key words in our approach to aging. We need to instill in young minds the importance of intergenerational relationships.” He suggested countries can get a lot more creative—both in terms of technology and other areas.



Panelists **Gunhild Hagestad**, **Nana Apt**, and **Thomas Cole** chat before their presentations.



Day 2:

Empowerment in Aging: Health & Human Rights

WELCOME REMARKS

Dr. Alexandre Sidorenko opens the day's briefing by looking back on the ten years since the International Year of Older Persons.



Dr. Alexandre Sidorenko

Head, Programme on Ageing, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

In 1992, the UN General Assembly decided to observe 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, opened Dr. Alexandre Sidorenko. The idea was to recognize humanity's demographic coming of age.

A few years later, in 1995, it was decided that the theme would be “toward a society for all ages.” This theme was an extension of what had been proclaimed at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen. Organizers also formulated the observance's objective, which would be to promote the UN Principles for Older Persons.

At the time, the UN Secretary General had noted, “We are in the midst of a silent revolution that extends well beyond demographics with major economic, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual implications.” These words formed the basis of the conceptual framework for the International Year of Older Persons.

Dr. Sidorenko explained the framework was built around four main dimensions. The first involved improving the situation of older persons, which was a traditional approach to international activities on aging. The second focused on lifelong individual development, which was relatively new. A third dimension looked at multi-generational relationships with independence and interdependence approaches interwoven into policy approaches.

Notably, the fourth dimension explored the relationship of aging and development. “For the first time, it proclaimed the idea of macro-level adjustment to the changing and aging societies of the world,” Dr. Sidorenko said.

When the International Year of Older Persons came to fruition in 1999, observances took place in many parts of the world. There were celebrations in Africa, China, Iran, Sri Lanka, Europe and Latin America, to name a few, Dr. Sidorenko noted. Australia and New Zealand adopted the slogan of “a country for all ages.”

In the subsequent 10 years, the legacy of the International Year of Older Persons has remained strong. For example, its theme was carried on to the 2002 Second World Assembly on Ageing and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

“The three priority directions of the Madrid plan are closely connected to the four dimensions of the International Year of Older Persons conceptual framework.” Dr. Sidorenko said. “These priorities include: older persons and development, enhancing health and well being into old age, and ensuring enabling and supportive environments.” Together, they have shaped international activities on aging since 2002.

“The transition from the International Year of Older Persons to the Madrid Plan was made possible due to efforts by the whole international community,” Dr. Sidorenko said. “What we’re doing here today is not only remembering—but looking forward to the tasks ahead.”

“The two points where the action is in population aging—the youngest and the oldest, or the bookend generations—is where we need to be.”

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Dr. Nana Apt provides her perspectives on aging in Ghana and other parts of Africa.



PANEL

Session moderated by Dr. Jorge Bravo, Chief of the Population and Development Section, Population Division, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Dr. Nana Apt
Professor and Dean of Academic Affairs, Ashesi University, Ghana

Too often conversations about health only focus on the absence of disease,

opened Dr. Nana Apt. She believes the emphasis should be on “feeling good about oneself and well being.”

When elders in Ghana were asked to name four components of well being, they responded: being needed, being with family members, being of use to family members; and being in good health. Unfortunately, Dr. Apt fears that older people in Africa are losing ground in these areas.

“Africans’ well being is being lessened—especially because of the changing social situation,” she worried. “The main factor that has brought this about is poverty.”

In 1982, when the First World Assembly on Ageing was planned, much of Africa was not yet aware of the coming demographic revolution. In fact, at the time, most government planners were concerned with curbing birth rates.

“There was limited understanding of the impact of demographic change, the effects of urban migration, and the shift from extended to nuclear families,” Dr. Apt said. “And there was little understanding of the tremendous burden that HIV/AIDS would place on older people.” There was also little appreciation of the contributions older people could make toward development.

When the UN Millennium Development Goals were formulated in 2000, there was no reference to older persons’ role in social development. The 2002 World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid sought to rectify this oversight.



Josh Collett, Vice President of International Affairs of AARP and **Dr. Francis Salerno**, Associate Chief of Geriatrics from Lehigh Valley Hospital in Pennsylvania, speak before the briefing.

BRIEFING PROGRAM

However, despite the adoption of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, monitoring and assessment has remained slow and uncoordinated in Africa.

Yet, even with these issues, Africa is becoming increasingly sensitized to the consequences of demographic aging, Dr. Apt suggested. Spearheaded by NGOs and concerned individuals, the needs of older people are gaining attention.

Although AIDS is reducing life expectancy in some African countries, the older population is expected to continue growing over the next 30 years. In fact, it will double in many African countries.

Africa is also coping with rapidly changing family structures as young people migrate from rural to urban areas. “The less that older people can rely on traditional care systems, the more they have to rely on their own incomes,” Dr. Apt said.

This shift is both driven and compounded by poverty, she suggested. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 23 countries are poorer today than in 1975. Over 50 percent of the population lives on less than US \$1 a day.

“Poverty in Africa is widespread, as is underemployment and unemployment,” Dr. Apt said. “There are immense education and training needs that have yet to be studied fully, but we know they’ll require urgent attention.”

Dr. Apt suggested more attention must be paid to the feminization of poverty. “Lack of education and financial support, unequal access to and control of capital, and certain cultural values make life difficult for women,” she said. “Special social protection measures are required, and consideration needs to be given to creating income opportunities.”

“We are in the midst of a silent revolution that extends well beyond demographics with major economic, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual implications.”

Despite Africa's challenges, Dr. Apt has reasons for optimism. "Africans are becoming more aware of their civil rights," she said. "Older people, in particular, are demanding accountability, transparency, and human rights. This is a good phenomenon that will help move aging issues forward."

Professor Dr. Bernd Marin

Executive Director, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, affiliated with the United Nations, Vienna

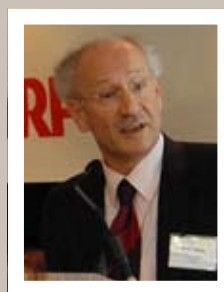
"Since 1999, all of us should have aged 10 years by definition, according to our passports," Professor Bernd Marin opened. However, he suggests that this is a grossly misleading view because it does not account for simultaneous, impressive gains in life expectancy in most—though not all—countries of the UN-European region. The UN-European region currently consists of 56 countries covering North America and all of Europe, including Southeastern Europe, the Balkans, Russia, Turkey, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Central Asia.

"In most European countries, life expectancy has continued to grow," Professor Marin explained. "This growth has not been slowing down, as frequently assumed, but rather speeding up over the past decade compared to previous decades or the last half a century."

Yet, 2009 brings much uncertainty, as the world waits to see the outcome of the financial crash and the corresponding deep economic and social crisis. "We don't know whether oil will be closer to US \$35 or US \$150 a barrel, or whether the exchange rate between the euro and dollar will be closer to 1.15 or 1.65, all values we have seen last year," Professor Marin said. "The outcome will determine whether we have five million people unemployed more or less — and on which side of the Atlantic they will be."

Bernd Marin

discusses
the effects of
demographic
change in Europe.



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“There are immense education and training needs that have yet to be studied fully, but we know they’ll require urgent attention.”

“Nobody knows today whether the US \$5 trillion meltdown of assets during the last 10 months, many of them related to old-age savings, will continue,” Professor Marin continued. He noted that no depression ever begins as a depression. Uncertainty prevails over whether the current crunch will turn out to be a temporary drawback or the beginning of persistent deflation and stagnation.

At the same time, the period of 2009 to 2012 (and somewhat less so until 2018) is the last “window of opportunity” to claim the “demographic dividend” for most UN-European countries, Professor Marin cautioned. He urged

them to implement the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and the Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS), reconfirmed in the Ministerial Conference of León (León Declaration November 2007). The European Centre in Vienna (ECV), together with United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Geneva, is monitoring RIS by the project “Mainstreaming Ageing: Indicators to Monitor Implementation” (MA:IMI / II 2008 – 2012).

Turning to the future of Europe, Professor Marin reflected on the changing nature of the region. Currently, many more people live in Eastern Europe than in the EU-15. The majority of Eastern European countries have displayed an impressive “catching up” process in recent years after having overcome the post-transformation depression after 1989. But Professor Marin worries it may not always be fully sustainable.

Eastern Europe is a very heterogeneous region, Professor Marin emphasized. “We have countries like Bulgaria who could lose up to half of their working age population ready for the labor market within one or two more generations,” he said. “But others like Turkey and Uzbekistan are growing very rapidly.”

“In some Eastern European countries, we can observe population aging without people living longer,” Professor Marin continued. “There are

even countries, like Russia, where life expectancy today is lower than it was 20, 30 or even 50 years ago.” This is in stark contrast to all Western and many Eastern countries where life expectancy continues to increase steeply and rapidly.

“Population aging and the way countries are coping with it—or not—will have a major impact on what happens,” he explained. “If you lose one million people each year by natural population development alone, which is currently the case in Russia, you’re in very deep trouble—even with high immigration compensating for some of the population losses.” Immigration, which is already contested politically, would have to increase seven (Russia) or nine (EU-27) times higher than now in order to keep labor force participation constant in the long-term, Professor Marin noted, illustrating one of the main challenges ahead.

Professor Marin concluded by discussing interactions of population aging with socio-economic risks and opportunities in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as their potential impact on Western Europe and North America. He highlighted overall population trends, such as fertility decline and how highly uneven growth and shrinking processes are increasing migration pressures. He also touched on the impact of the diverging pace of aging on labor markets, standards of living and poverty, pensions, health, and long-term care.

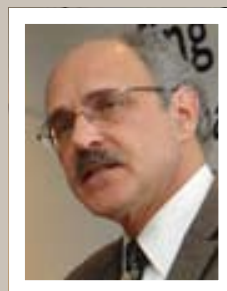
Dr. Thomas Cole

Director, McGovern Center for Health, Humanities, and the Human Spirit, University of Texas

“Full participation of older people who enjoy good health redounds to the benefit of all ages,” asserted Thomas Cole. “In part, this is because lifelong development under these conditions leads to self transcendence and concern for others.”

Dr. Cole emphasized that health is about more than just the absence of

Dr. Thomas Cole explores the importance of spirituality for healthy aging.



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“Population aging and the way countries are coping with it—or not—will have a major impact on what happens.”

disease. It also encompasses a state of well being that includes a sense of purpose and meaning.

In the last 25 years, there has been considerable research that indicates that having a sense of life purpose is positively correlated with reduced morbidity and mortality, Dr. Cole explained. It also became clear that traditional models of successful aging, which emphasized minimizing risk and maximizing function, overlooked the element of spiritual well being.

Summarizing the research, Dr. Cole noted that participation in religious congregations and life seems to promote healthy behaviors and lifestyles; buffer the effects of stress and isolation; strengthen the psychological effects of positive emotions; nurture hope, optimism, and positive expectations; and, more controversially, activate an altered state of consciousness.

In addition to the impact of religious practices on health, there is a strong tradition of religiously based provision of care and services, Dr. Cole explained. Churches are an especially important site for care and community among poor and minority populations.

Turning to the meanings and purposes of later life, Dr. Cole reflected on what norms, values, purposes, and meanings should serve as guides. He noted that various world religions converge around an ideal of individual human development. This involves the cultivation of wisdom and concern for others.

Dr. Cole also suggested that the human right to individual development and health carries with it a responsibility. “While society has an obligation to support lifelong development, individuals have a responsibility to grow in wisdom and concern for others.”

Unfortunately, older people are often excluded rather than integrated into their societies. In developing countries, poverty, isolation, and lack of access to health and social services undermines the health and well being

of older people. This, in turn, deprives children of models and mentors as well as sources of material and spiritual support.

These problems also exist to some degree in well developed welfare states, Dr. Cole continued. There, marginalization and devaluation have been bureaucratized with the age-graded life course “boxes” of school, work, and retirement.

To adapt to population aging, policymakers and NGOs must envision how basic societal institutions can generate new structural incentives that encourage integration and enable people to contribute throughout their lives. Dr. Cole suggested, in many cases, collaboration with faith-based organizations can be beneficial.

Dr. John Beard

Director, Department of Ageing and Life Course, World Health Organization

“The greatest risk we face from this economic crisis is that it could set back what we’ve achieved in the last 10 years,” opened Dr. John Beard, referring to the world’s progress in expanding social protections. However, he hopes countries will, instead, view the crisis as an opportunity to rethink inefficient systems and policies.

Reflecting on the decade’s achievements, Dr. Beard noted that there is now extensive social health insurance across the European Union. Thailand offers tax-financed health care, Brazil provides free primary health care, and social pensions have sprung up in countries like Botswana.

However, in the past few years, developing countries have watched the cost of food skyrocket. That, combined with rising fuel costs, has forced a hundred million people—many of whom are older people—back into poverty. Dr. Beard worries about the compounding effect of the current economic crisis.

Dr. John Beard discusses health and social integration in the context of the current global economic crisis.



BRIEFING PROGRAM

“We know that problems like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse come along with financial crises,” Dr. Beard said. “And during times of economic hardship, people tend to neglect health care—particularly preventative health care.”

During financial downturns, people also tend to move from private to public health care, which is already overstretched, Dr. Beard continued. In developing countries, they typically shift from self-funded care to no care. Older people are usually one of the most vulnerable populations.

He cautioned not to repeat the mistakes of the 1980s, when many countries faced rising fuel prices and debt. “A widespread response was to reduce budgets by shifting investments away from health and education,” he said. “Many countries are still suffering the legacy of those policies.”

A better approach was taken ten years ago during Asia’s economic crisis. South Korea decided to extend unemployment insurance, and Thailand used the opportunity to introduce medicines based on generic substitution. “That crisis saw the creation of things that have been of lasting benefit,” Dr. Beard said.

Dr. Beard urged governments to continue investing in the social sector and human capital. He also stressed how essential it is to keep contributing to the developing world.

At the same time, countries must find new ways for older people to be productive members of society. Now is the time to create employment schemes for older people and explore flexibility in taxation systems, he urged. Steps must also be taken to supplement the income of those whose savings have been devastated.

The current crisis also provides an opportunity to rethink inefficient health systems, Dr. Beard said. He highlighted the importance of preventative care as a means of increasing efficiency and improving quality.

CLOSING REMARKS

Mr. Josh Collett

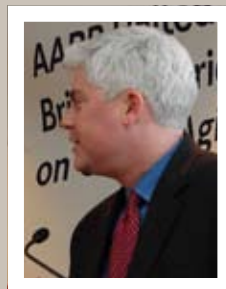
Vice President, Office of International Affairs, AARP

“The vision unveiled by the UN International Day of Older Persons 10 years ago is thriving,” said Josh Collett, as he wrapped up the UN Briefing Series. It has been affirmed and strengthened during the last decade in ways that have transformed it into a worldview on aging shared by scores of nations and advocacy organizations.

“Today, we have added another degree of sophistication to the vision by reinforcing the importance of empowerment,” Mr. Collett continued. He described empowerment as a springboard to more positive images of aging, to healthier aging, and to the realization of human rights. Older people are empowered when their environment promotes dignity, when they maintain a sense of purpose, and when they see themselves as progressing along a “life course” of individual development.

“Empowerment as a rubric for positive aging moves us a step closer to a society for all ages—and full social integration,” Mr. Collett said in closing. “This is precisely where we need to be going as we face dramatic demographic change over the next several decades.”

Josh Collett gives closing remarks to conclude the 2009 Briefing Series.



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The UN Programme on Ageing is part of the Division for Social Policy and Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. It is the focal point within the United Nations system on matters related to ageing. As the focal point, its primary action is to facilitate and promote the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, including designing guidelines for policy development and implementation; advocating means to mainstream ageing issues into development agendas; engaging in dialogue with civil society and the private sector; and information exchange.

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