

Will the United Nations Overlook Ageing Once Again?

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By

Mary J. Mayer

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When one thinks of climate change, the immediate images that come to mind are usually weather-related: fierce storms, melting icebergs, rising sea levels. But there is another global climate change underway as well, this one a social rather than environmental impact, bringing with it a different rising tide that to date has been given far less attention by policymakers. This change is the unprecedented increase in life expectancy that is affecting the population structure of nations throughout the world. Yet few nations have actually begun to address both the social and economic policy and programmatic implications of an ageing population.

In 2012 there were 810,000,000 million persons 60 and older worldwide; 12 % of the world's total population. In 2050, less than four decades hence the number is projected to pass the 2 billion mark and comprise 22%, or more than one out of five, of all persons on the planet.

Even so, despite their growing numbers, older persons as a group continue to be marginalized socially, economically and, especially, in regard to policy planning in both developed and developing nations. Age discrimination and neglect can be and has been documented in every country. But it is rarely addressed and, possibly, even unrecognized. Moreover, almost never acknowledged are the experience and resources that many older persons contribute to their societies through paid and volunteer work.

When we look at the one organization that has the capability of bringing a global focus to this dramatic demographic change, it is apparent that historically ageing has not been a principal concern of the United Nations since its founding. Indeed, even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the first major achievements of the UN adopted in 1948, states that all human beings are entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration without regard to "race, colour, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status". Note that one important dimension is not included: age. Perhaps it was meant to be assumed under "other status". Whatever the reason, older persons are not explicitly recognized under international human rights laws that legally oblige governments to realize the rights of all persons.

However, although ageing has not been a major focus at the UN since its founding, this is not to say that older persons and ageing issues have been entirely excluded from UN attention over the years. Specific recognition has been given to them by the UN in a number of documents, events and programmes as well as implicitly in others. An Aging Unit was created in the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 1971 where it continues today as the Programme on Ageing. In 1991, the United Nations Principles for Older Persons were adopted. 1999 saw the inauguration of the annual

celebration of the International Day of Older Persons at the UN. And, most importantly, there were the convening of the First and Second World Assemblies on Ageing, held in Vienna in 1982 and Madrid in 2002. Out of this second gathering came the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing providing a comprehensive set of objectives and actions that would enable older persons to participate in their societies with full rights and to age with security and dignity.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that the UN routinely publishes population data for every Member State, including those 60 and older, ageing and ageing issues have been all but invisible in the conduct of three major planning and goal-setting development-focused efforts of the UN over the past several decades.

Beginning In 1992, at a time when there was no lack of data on increasing life expectancy worldwide, 178 Member States, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, adopted a non-binding, voluntary action plan for the UN, for multilateral organizations and for governments known as Agenda 21, (for the 21st Century). Agenda 21 emphasizes social and economic dimensions directed toward such issues as combatting poverty and promoting health and health care as well as the conservation of and management of resources for the purpose of development. One has to look hard through this outcome document's 300 pages to find any mention whatsoever of ageing or older persons though other populations (women, youth) are cited.

Moreover, Section III of Agenda 21 identified eight Major Groups whose role is to provide broad public participation in working toward sustainable development based on the principle that only through the committed involvement of all social groups can effective and participatory implementation of sustainable development policies and plans be achieved. These groups are: Women; Children and Youth; Indigenous peoples; Non-Governmental Organizations; Local Authorities; Workers and Trade Unions; Business and Industry; and the Scientific and Technological Community. At a later date Farmers were added as a Major group bringing the total to nine. It is mystifying as to the inclusion of children and the omission of older persons in Agenda 21 but it speaks to the continuing invisibility of the latter in world for a just two decades ago.

Following the adoption of Agenda 21, a Commission on Sustainable Development was established in 1992 at the UN and, has since served as a high-level forum for sustainable development issues, reviewing progress and monitoring and reporting on the implementation of Agenda 21. Its 53 members meet annually at the UN to address a multi-year Programme of Work consisting of a thematic cluster of issues as well as a number of cross-cutting issues such as poverty eradication, unsustainable patterns of

production and consumption and the protection and management of natural resources for economic and social development. The Major Groups are important participants in the annual sessions of the Commission.

Two decades later, a UN Conference known familiarly as Rio+20 was convened in that city to review Agenda 21. The 180 Member States attending reaffirmed their commitment to Agenda 21 in an outcome document called “The Future We Want” and called for a strengthening of the role of the Major Groups. But once again, ageing and ageing issues failed to achieve significant inclusion in the document, which makes exactly two mentions of concern to us: “older persons” and “elderly”. The latter stating that “special attention should also be paid to the health needs of the elderly and the disabled population”. Well, perhaps we can consider this progress.

Another example, as the year 2000 approached, the UN began a major planning undertaking. With the new century seen as an opportunity to offer an occasion for Member States to identify and act on the challenges ahead and to provide them with a renewed sense of mission to make a real and measurable difference in people’s lives, the UN began work toward establishing a set of 15-year goals to address these two purposes. Civil society played an active role in this process.

Non-Governmental Organizations accredited to the UN as well as other agencies and organizations came together to develop recommendations for input into the document that would finally be adopted. These civil society discussions culminated in the issuance in May, 2000 of a document entitled “We the Peoples...Millennium Forum”. And from this paper a Millennium Forum Declaration was submitted to the UN for consideration in its deliberations. A wide-ranging statement of an envisioned future, the Declaration proposed 26 actions to be taken by governments; 14 by the UN and three by civil society. Although a great effort was made by organizations concerned with ageing and ageing issues, most notably by the NGO Committee on Aging in New York, to include these concerns in the Declaration, no mention of ageing or older persons ultimately appeared in it.

In September, 2000, at a Millennium Summit the UN General Assembly of Member States unanimously adopted a Millennium Declaration which put forth eight goals and targets for the new century and are known as the Millennium Development Goals. All 189 UN Member States pledged by 2015 to:

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by reducing by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and reduce by half the proportion who suffer from hunger.

2) Achieve universal primary education to ensure that all children complete a full course of primary schooling

3) Promote gender equality and empower women by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education

4) Reduce child mortality through reducing by 2/3s the mortality rate among children under 5

5) Improve maternal health by reducing by 3/4s the maternal mortality rate

6) Combat HIV-AIDs, malaria and other diseases by halting and reversing the spread of HIV-AIDs and the incidence of malaria and other diseases

7) Ensure environmental sustainability by integrating principles of sustainable development into national policies and programmes; by reducing by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water

8) Develop a global partnership for development

Once again, the implications of a dramatically increasing number of older persons worldwide failed to be recognized by the international community in its planning for the future. (Although it might be pointed out that as recently as 2009 references in two human rights documents addressed age discrimination in the specific contexts of employment and professional retraining and execution for witchcraft).

(In 2007, the midway point in this Millennium Development Goals initiative, the UN issued the Millennium Development Goals Report, which gave a comprehensive global assessment of progress toward achieving the Goals. Not surprisingly the results were uneven. While commendable progress was shown for some goals, notably toward halving extreme poverty and increasing enrollment in primary education in developing countries, the progress was less favorable for other goals such as access to basic sanitation, the spread of HIV-AIDs and maternal mortality).

So we come to the present. 2015 is just a half year away and a new planning effort is underway. This time we are determined that ageing can no longer be overlooked.

