

**UNECE Side Event at the United Nations Headquarters
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“MIPAA meets the UN Social Development Goal #1
Responses to old-age poverty in the UNECE region”**

**Contribution by DirkJarré
President of EURAG - The European Federation of Older Persons**



The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development rightly starts with the paramount objective of “Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere” in order to implement human rights for all people.

The SDGs are to focus, in particular, on the most vulnerable populations and should ensure that no one in society is left behind. A non-observance of the fundamental human rights of older persons and the difficulties, limitations and exclusions still suffered by them do not only constitute personal injustices but also mean an acute ethical deficiency and a serious impoverishment for society at large.

To disregard and leave this group behind, certainly constitutes a great loss for the quality, the social fabric and the development potential of human society. In fact, older persons with all their life experience, their accumulated competences, balanced judgement and wisdom have a lot to offer to society and many of them are more than willing to invest time and energy into the well-being of the community.

It is obvious that governments have the primary responsibility in this area and are expected to establish the necessary national and regional policies and strategies. But the governments cannot shoulder such an ambitious project alone. In order to be successful, they have to reach out to their natural societal partners and must take on board organised civil society representing the concerns of those in need of attention and support or affected by public measures.

Jointly these two key partners have to go through all necessary phases of policy formulation, decision-making and implementation. This whole process of assessing needs, analysing options, decision-making, implementation and monitoring is a matter of intense and trustful cooperation - with the State having paramount responsibilities - but based on the full recognition of the crucial role of civil society.

Without civil society, grand plans and good intentions like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development risk to remain more or less empty words on paper, disappearing in deep drawers of politicians and public administrations.

On the other hand, a deep sense of cooperation, mutual trust, enthusiasm, commitment and dedication of both partners can lead to quite remarkable results.

The 56 member states represented in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe have, at a very early stage, realized this decisive role of civil society organisations to make the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, MIPAA, a reality for people. Already in the first phase of conceptualisation and formulation of the UNECE Regional Implementation

Strategy a representative of competent organised civil society had been invited to join the drafting committee in a full-fledged role. He was then continuously involved in the preparatory work for the Ministerial Declarations, during the next fifteen years, designing new governmental orientations and commitments.

During this process civil society contributed substantially to the political and strategic debates of the Working Group on Ageing by highlighting, from a praxis point of view, major problems that older persons have to face in society - like, for example, the mainly negative image of ageing, the non-recognition of the individuality of older persons, their unjustified discrimination on the labour market, the fact that older persons are mainly perceived as a burden on society and not as a most valuable asset - and so on.

As a consequence, a remarkable change occurred in the central issues of concern UNECE governments have dealt with over the years. From the first ministerial conference topic "*A society for all ages: challenges and opportunities*" the attention went to "*Ensuring a society for all ages: promoting quality of life and active ageing*" to finally focus on "A Sustainable Society for All Ages: Realizing the potential of living longer" - addressing in particular the value of the potential of older persons for society. This represented, indeed, a fundamental shift in perspective.

However, the issue of poverty remains a central multi-dimensional, dangerous and thus most crucial issue to be urgently tackled with. After all, around one quarter of the European population are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

European NGOs - at local, regional, national and international level - have always given great attention to the need of the most vulnerable, disregarded and poorest population and tried, as much as possible, to provide support and relief - particularly in terms of basic material first aid measures.

But civil society organisations have also always pointed out that poverty is not solely a matter of material deprivation that can be simply solved by social security measures or welfare aid, but that it goes hand-in-hand with severe prejudices and discriminations of all sorts, diminished access to education and information, barriers for participation, social marginalisation, a shorter life expectancy, low self-esteem, loneliness and other severe threats and disadvantages.

Furthermore, in most cases poverty and social exclusion is associated with a strong feeling of helplessness and ensuing political indifference grounded on the conviction that "my voice is not heard and my vote does not count anyway".

Thus accepting poverty in any dimension is not only an unjustifiable negation of fundamental rights but seriously endangers democracy and social cohesion in society. It is absolutely irresponsible and undermines the future of our civilisation if politics, the economic actors and civil society do not energetically and effectively address this issue by all possible ways and means - among others: better education for all, fairer employment strategies, adequate tax policies, and enhanced incentives for participation - to name just a few.

Together with its government partners - and sometimes even against their opposition - civil society will go on addressing this central issue and thus contribute as much as possible to the achievement of the SDG objective "Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere".

Thank you very much for your kind attention!