NGOs have warmly welcomed these arrangements, which will allow them to make significant contributions to the Regional Implementation Strategy. To do so, they have organized themselves accordingly by putting into place appropriate mechanisms of internal consultation, the final output of which will lead to a consolidated position paper to be introduced into the governmental negotiations.

But this will not be the end of the process. First of all, NGOs obviously will normally be closely associated to or be partners in the concrete national and local implementation activities to make the Plan of Action become a reality for the people and society at large. In addition to playing an important role in the various areas of their specific responsibilities, NGOs will, in particular, feel that it is their task to monitor and evaluate government performance and failures in policies or action, and they will, consequently, create public awareness of what has still to be done.

Finally, it is also important that NGOs be partners in the envisaged further process of the promotion of the Regional Implementation Strategy through regional cooperation. Their positions have to be an integral part of the negotiations on the objectives, content and forms of the monitoring and evaluation at the regional level.

The NGO contributions, in terms of provision of information and findings, will be indispensable; thus, they have to be closely involved in the definition of indicators, as well as in the reporting and assessment processes, to monitor achievements or failures not only at the national but also at the regional level. NGOs in the UNECE region are fully aware of their key role and various responsibilities in regard to the revised International Plan of Action on Ageing, and in particular the Regional Implementation Strategy, and they are committed to giving their best to promote the long-term success of both.

The United Nations as a whole should recognize this forward-looking arrangement of cooperation with NGOs as an important "best practice" example to be copied, adapted and implemented in other regions, as well as at the global level, as part of the concept of the new governance strategy, as this would be in their own best interest.

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A Convention to Protect Their Rights?

By Danielle Bridel

A wealth of oral and written information on ageing, as well as suggestions and recommendations on how best to adjust to a greying world, have come forward since the preparations for the First World Assembly on Ageing, which took place in Vienna in 1982.

The United Nations has grappling with demographic changes in the world over the past decades, not least in its 1982 International Plan on Ageing, containing relevant considerations concerning the elderly on matters of health and nutrition, consumer protection, housing and the environment, family, social welfare, income security, employment and, most importantly, life-long education. Less than ten years later, on 16 December 1991, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, on independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. It also decided to observe 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons.

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Despite such efforts, many older persons in the world are marginalized and seen as a burden to society, and especially so for the working population. Their reaction is withdrawal from the community and isolation.

What more can the United Nations do to improve the situation of this growing segment of the population?

The 2002 International Plan of Action on Ageing calls for changes in attitudes, policies and practices at all levels in all sectors, so that the enormous potential of ageing in the twenty-first century may be fulfilled. Despite these beautiful and brave words, it is difficult to forecast, after two Preparatory Committees, if the new Action Plan will be better implemented than its predecessor.

In the run-up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing, scheduled in Madrid in April 2002, some of the UN specialized agencies have made strenuous and constructive efforts to enrich the debate. Two examples of these valid contributions are the position paper of the World Health Organization, based on a discussion paper debated at many consultations, and the report of the International Labour Organization, "An inclusive society for an ageing population: the employment and social protection challenge."

Many NGOs believe in a rights-based approach to ageing, where older persons are considered full and equal citizens enjoying full and equal rights. An attempt in this direction was made by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comment No. 6, adopted in 1995.
Noting that the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of age, the Committee says that States parties to the Covenant are obliged to pay particular attention to promoting and protecting the economic, social and cultural rights of older persons. At the same time, it also gives an indication of how the various rights contained in the Covenant should be applied to older persons. If I were to summarize the rationale of General Comment No. 6, I would say it showed how ageing could be mainstreamed in the implementation of an international instrument.

With regard to “equal rights of men and women”, the Committee stresses that States parties should pay particular attention to older women, because they spent all or part of their lives caring for their families without engaging in a remunerated activity, which would have entitled them to an old-age pension.

In addressing work-related rights, the Committee notes the need for measures to prevent discrimination based on age in employment and occupation, to ensure safe working conditions for older workers and to implement programmes to prepare them for retirement.

Article 9 of the Covenant, which recognizes the rights of everyone to social security, is particularly important for older persons. The Committee specifies that States parties should, within the limits of available resources, provide non-contributory old-age benefits and other assistance for all older persons who are not entitled to old-age pension or other social security benefit or assistance, and who have no other sources of income to protect the family. In conformity with the Covenant, Governments and non-governmental actors need to establish social services to support families who have older persons living in their homes.

For older persons, the right to an adequate standard of living would mean access to adequate food, water, shelter and clothing, as well as assistance for restoration, development and improvement, and adaptation of their homes.

They should have the right to the enjoyment of a satisfactory standard of physical and mental health in which they may have invested during their entire life span. Prevention, as well as rehabilitation, play an important role.

The last General Comment of the Committee relates to the right to education and culture. For older persons, this right may be realized through the availability of educational programmes and through opportunities to make their know-how and experience available to younger generations. The media and educational institutions could and should help to overcome negative stereotyped images of older persons.

Comparing the Committee’s Comments with requests for the recognition of all the rights involved, it would appear that these Comments might not have had the aimed-for impact on national legislations. In any case, they do not address older persons’ civil and political rights.

There have been some proposals to mainstream the rights of older persons in the reports of the Special Rapporteurs of the Commission on Human Rights. Since these reports already integrate the gender perspective in their different domains, such a solution might be welcome and acceptable, but I would only see it as an interim measure.

In the long term, it might be more advisable for the United Nations to envisage a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, following in the footsteps of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and on Migrant Workers. Such a convention could be based on the Comments referred to above as far as the economic, social and cultural rights are concerned, and be complemented by a section on the civil and political rights of older persons. Evidently, a monitoring committee would have to be established to oversee the application of this proposed convention. I am fully aware that such a proposal would not be met with much enthusiasm at the political level, since Governments believe that there already exists a complete legal human rights structure. However, as an NGO representative, I dare submit it even if, at the present time, it may well be a dream or Utopia.