Resources, Not Burdens

By Helen Hamlin

The growth of the elderly population presents one of the most challenging demographic trends of the twenty-first century. The number of persons aged 60 and over will have risen from 200 million in 1950 to 1.2 billion by 2050, a sixfold increase, which will raise the proportion from 8 to 14 per cent. In the developing world, there will be more people over 60 than under age 14 by 2050. This population explosion will have a dramatic and unprecedented impact on our economic, social and political lives. Because the implications of global population ageing are enormous, it is incumbent upon the United Nations and its specialized agencies to take a leading role in promoting policies and programmes addressing issues about ageing.

The United Nations Principles for Older Persons, approved by the General Assembly in 1991, provide a blueprint on how older persons should be regarded in their societies. Indeed, the Principles are applicable to persons of all ages, a concept that assumes greater resonance if we subscribe to the fact that ageing is a lifelong process. Understanding and taking seriously the demographic data produced by the United Nations and other eminent authorities must inevitably lead to raising awareness of the significant nature of the longevity revolution we are experiencing. It is telling that we had to wait twenty years to have a Second World Assembly on Ageing and that in the development of Agenda 21, the huge population of older persons, already evident in 1992, was not considered a major group and not worthy of mention as such. Ageing concerns can no longer be seen as an add-on to the roster of great issues that form the basis of world summits and conferences, which have preoccupied the United Nations over the last dozen years.

The Second World Assembly has offered a new and exciting opportunity to bring the issue to the forefront of international concern and action at a time when the world must address this tremendous growth in the number of older persons. The opportunities and challenges inherent in these population changes range from the social to the environmental to the financial. Many nations have been slow to accept the reality of these changes, and public policy developers can no longer deny the significant impact of the great population shifts, which we know will continue to mount. All UN Member States, whether in the developing or developed world, can no longer put off paying close attention to the cross-cutting nature of a growing older population.

How can the objective of acknowledging ageing issues and considering the impact of the ageing of the population be met? How can the objective of public policies that support and encourage older persons be assured?

To begin with, older persons must be seen as resources, not as burdens, in their societies. There are certain essentials needed by older persons, as well as by people of all ages, to enable a minimum quality of life, such as adequate income and employment opportunities, including retraining, second careers and recognition of the value of unpaid and paid work; accessible health and social services and shelter; and full partnership in society, including participation in decision-making processes. These elements should be markers in developing action plans. Public policy planning should create an environment for the full implementation of programmes and policies to meet older persons’ needs to assure their contribution to sustained economic growth and social development. Further, public policy development and programme implementation are based on experience and research. Therefore, the United Nations has an important role in promoting, supporting and utilizing research on ageing to ensure that policy development reflects the needs and concerns of older persons. In this way, the various aspects of life in the older years are addressed, both for those who continue to be active and productive, and for those whose advancing age presents certain problems.

To meet these objectives, non-governmental organizations and other civil societies look to the United Nations for leadership, understanding and effective action in addressing the issues of ageing. The implementation of action plans is critical to any public policy agenda, and we expect the United Nations to work towards building a society not only for older persons but also for people of all ages. Implementation for the public good and quality of life, as embodied in the UN Principles for Older Persons, would truly place people at the centre of society and fulfill the promise of full integration and social protection committed to at the World Summit for Social Development. NGOs and civil society want to assist the United Nations in this important task by working together to enable careful and sensitive implementation. We tread an entwined path toward these ends, but we hope to forge partnerships, which can be meaningful, substantive and sustainable, to accomplish our common goals and objectives.

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