What the United Nations Should Do About our Ageing World

The UN Second World Assembly on Ageing concluded on 12 April 2002 as we go to press, with the adoption of an International Plan of Action, containing over 120 recommendations, and an accompanying Political Declaration. Both stress the “crucial” importance of incorporating ageing issues into all development plans, and focus on three main priorities: older persons and development; advancing health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments.

Addressing Exclusion and Denial of Equal Rights

By Pamela Mboya

Rapid population ageing in the developing world presents a special challenge to the United Nations and the international community. Older people in resource-poor countries have the same rights as other sectors of the population, yet violation of their rights due to chronic poverty still has to be addressed. All UN Member States need to make a commitment to address population ageing and its consequences, in the same spirit that they have acted to promote the rights of the child and protection of the environment.

As the world ages, poverty and isolation of those who live into older age frequently undermine the benefits of a long life. Population ageing is a critical issue in the twenty-first century. It is imperative that the implications of global population ageing for poverty reduction and for development be acknowledged and acted upon.

Due attention needs to be paid to the different situations faced by older people in the developing and developed world, as well as countries in transition. Although population ageing has become a well-publicized phenomenon in the industrialized nations of Europe and North America, by 2050 the largest number of older people will be in developing countries. In the period July 1999-July 2000 alone, 77 per cent of the world’s net increase in the numbers of older people occurred in developing countries [Kinsella, K. & Veltkamp, V.A., US Census Bureau, An Aging World, 2001]. The older population in Africa, estimated to be just above 38 million, will shoot to 212 million in 2050, according to the United Nations Population Division. Furthermore, the rate of population ageing is most rapid in countries least equipped to deal with its impacts. Populations are already relatively old, and recent State collapse and the transition to a capitalist society have left older people particularly vulnerable without the State support and safety net mechanisms.

As a member of the Board of HelpAge International, I have seen first-hand how poverty has profound and long-term impact on older people. The capacity of people to meet their basic needs is increasingly compromised by age. Many older people lack the most basic requirements—food, water, shelter and health care—and are chronically poor. In preparation for the Second World Assembly on Ageing, we consulted with older people in a range of developing and transition countries. These consultations show the severity of poverty in old age (HelpAge International, State of the world’s older people 2002). For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, older people reported that “food is our most pressing need”, while in Indonesia an older woman said “the good life is when I can find food”. Consultations in many countries of Africa produced the same results.

Adequate, safe and secure shelter is also beyond the reach of many older people, particularly the increasing numbers living alone. In Kenya, it was noted that “it is easy to identify the house of an older person since it is often dilapidated and of poor quality” in Moldova, older people living in a rural area reported that the State-run water supply system had fallen into disrepair, and that they were physically unable to use the wells that provided water locally. In the drive to understand and tackle poverty, which now dominates development thinking and action, the experience by large numbers of older people in developing countries has been a persistent blind spot.

Pamela Mboya is Chairman of HelpAge Kenya and a Member of the Board of HelpAge International, a global network of not-for-profit organizations, with a mission to work with and for disadvantaged older people worldwide to achieve a lasting improvement in the quality of their lives.
Development analysts and policy makers have largely excluded older people from poverty debates, regarding them as economically unproductive. This undermines poverty alleviation strategies by failing to recognize older people's actual and potential contributions to the well-being and survival of families and communities, especially the tremendous task older people are assuming in caring for people living with HIV/AIDS and their orphaned grandchildren. It also represents a failure to give equal status to their basic human rights. The Millennium Development Goals for global poverty reduction cannot be achieved unless older people's poverty and access to health, social security and basic needs are addressed as a component of comprehensive and inclusive poverty reduction strategies and interventions. The challenge is to incorporate their needs and contributions into mainstream development agendas and interventions.

The United Nations and associated bodies, therefore, need to make equal commitment to confront the implications of population ageing. Sufficient resources need to be allocated and links made with the range of existing UN agreements, in particular the Millennium Development Goals, and rights-based approaches to development. One way in which such a commitment can be consolidated is to ensure that action on ageing is backed by fully mandated, resource and supported programmes implemented by Member States.

The United Nations itself should raise the profile of ageing issues within the UN system and the broader development agenda, and monitor the implementation of the International Strategy for Action on Ageing (ISAA). Similarly, the UN Development Programme should be mandated to include issues of population ageing and older people within their remit in overseeing that commitments to international declarations are followed and put into practice. Greater resources should also be provided for technical assistance to Governments and international and national development agencies. The United Nations needs to promote the inclusion of older people in development policies and interventions and in the work of social and economic research institutions.

To address this diversity of issues and needs, regional UN bodies should be mandated to oversee and direct the implementation of the ISAA in their particular socio-economic and demographic context. The African Union has taken a lead in this regard through the drafting and approval of a policy framework and plan of action on ageing for Africa. This underscores the importance of the family and State working together to support older people, addresses issues of chronic poverty, promotes older people's rights and recognizes the importance of involving today's and tomorrow's generations of older people in building a society for all ages.

The United Nations (is) Still Rather Timid

By Dirk Jarré

The United Nations General Assembly resolution, which endorsed the idea of a revision of the International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted in 1982 in Vienna, does not only comprise the decision to hold the Second World Assembly on Ageing in April 2002 in Madrid, Spain, but also stipulates that the revision and ensuring implementation processes should give particular attention to "appropriate forms of public/private partnership, including with non-governmental organizations, at all levels, for building societies for all ages". It is, in fact, a common view that NGOs strongly reflect living conditions, concerns, needs and expectations of people in our societies. On the other hand, it is evident that they play a key role in addressing societal problems and improving living conditions in such a way that all people can feel respected, can fully enjoy their rights and participate as citizens in the development of the community. Thus, NGOs are considered as critical opposition numbers, as well as natural partners of Government, in terms of policy orientation and action. A plan of action on ageing, with the objective of building a society for all ages, is inconceivable without the close involvement of civil society organizations and in particular NGOs, be they membership associations of older persons or organizations defending their rights, providing services for them or working for the well-being of society at large.

The United Nations and particularly the Member States are still rather timid to put it mildly, in considering NGOs as important partners in the process of revision of the International Plan of Action, by giving them an adequate position and say in the debates and negotiations. They, therefore, miss the chance to hear more directly the voice of the citizen through civil society organizations, which express the concerns, hopes, fears and capacities of people.

But even if the United Nations is not yet ready at the global level to fully live up to citizens' expectations through new ways and means of modern transparent and participatory governance, there is hope and encouraging development at the regional level. The UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations, covering more or less the whole Northern hemisphere with some 55 Member States, including Canada and the United States, has decided to be the first UN Commission to work on a regional implementation strategy for the International Plan of Action on Ageing. And the UNECE has always taken very seriously the recommendation "to give particular attention to appropriate forms of public/private partnership, including with non-governmental organizations, at all levels, for building societies for all ages". Recognizing this, the UNECE has invited NGO representatives to participate in a significant way in all stages of the preparation process and has offered them exemplary conditions of representation.