



# AGE Platform Europe response to the UN consultation on the impact of climate change on the rights of older persons

This answer is submitted by [AGE Platform Europe](http://www.age-platform.eu), the largest EU network of organisations directly representing some 40 million older persons. The answer provided here has been drafted based on consultation of some of AGE experts from the Task Forces on Human Rights and Healthy Ageing. Although climate change and ageing is a relatively new area of work for AGE and most of our members, in this position we highlight some key concerns from the perspective of older person in the EU.

## Question 1: Impacts of climate change on the rights of older persons

Older persons are not a homogeneous group and climate change will impact older individuals differently depending on their socioeconomic backgrounds, place of living whether they work or are retired, their state of health or disability, gender and other factors. For example, for rural older people, particularly subsistence farmers, who are often living on or below poverty line, climate change can bring devastation and ruin. Climate change can also amplify existing inequalities, especially for people experiencing economic hardship and social disadvantage. These diverse situations - depending, among others, on income, support needs, housing and living situations, and others - need to be taken into account in strategy development and planning. Climate change has multiple and far-reaching effects on older persons, among other population groups. In this contribution, we aim to highlight some of the main ways in which older people's rights are affected. Our input is based on the experience of AGE Platform Europe members in several EU countries and the EU institutional framework.

On average, older persons are disproportionately affected by climate change due to a number of factors. They are more likely to be faced with chronic health conditions, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and diabetes and to require care and support. They are also more likely to be digitally excluded and to experience loneliness and isolation. Many challenges that older people face in the context of climate change are intrinsically linked with the wider societal phenomenon of ageism, which drives the marginalisation and exclusion of older people in many spheres of life. This includes – among others - actions when it comes to devising solutions to mitigate climate change, providing necessary information, prevention and support mechanisms, and opportunities for participation in planning, decision-making and knowledge-sharing generally and specifically relating to climate change, its prevention and its effects. Due to the combination of these structural factors, older people are more likely to find themselves in a more vulnerable position both in terms of direct health impacts and also in terms of access to necessary information and support in order to cope with the effects of climate change, prepare for emergencies and make adaptations.



Older persons may experience change in the natural environment differently than other age groups, especially in case they have lifelong ties with their place of living or work and/or because of traditional, cultural or professional practices associated with nature. The pace of change, including solutions to deal with climate change, such as rapid digitalisation of services, phasing out the use of cars or gas boilers combined with lack of information and support risks leaving older people behind. However, it must be stressed that older people are not less capable of adaptation and learning new skills and techniques. Provided with adequate support and information, older people can and will adapt to new situations. In fact, there are many examples of older people showing resilience, solidarity and leadership in times of emergency and change, exemplified during the recent pandemic, but also in times of migration flows and other life-changing periods.

In emergency situations, for example in cases of heatwaves, wildfires or floods, older people, especially those with support needs are disadvantaged because they cannot help themselves and/or move to safe spaces as easily. This concerns both older people in residential care settings and those who live in the community, who may be deprioritised in case of evacuation. The recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the real risks to the health, safety and life of older persons unless particular attention is paid to persons who live alone and those who require assistance in their everyday living. People who lack access to formal support systems (such as professional caregivers or care in residential settings) may also be more vulnerable in the context of emergencies as they do not know where to seek assistance and lack access to information.<sup>1</sup> Disaster and emergency protocols and interventions need to include measures for the safe evacuation, support and prioritisation of older persons in vulnerable situations, especially those facing difficulties to travel (for example, people with reduced mobility or those who have to rely on public transport, which is often disrupted during emergencies) or to find adequate food and shelter (for example, if they live in remote areas and/or do not have close family or friends).

Systems of information, alerts, warnings and prevention that are only available on Apps or via digital means exclude older people who don't have access to them. These need to be available through different information channels, including for instance television and radio, as well ensuring that information reaches the most marginalised individuals through targeted means (such as phone calls or visits). When health and support services are disrupted in case of emergency, older people with chronic conditions and those with care needs, are particularly affected, as was shown also during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can lead to health deterioration, malnutrition and isolation.<sup>2</sup> Due to institutional ageism, older people may also be excluded from measures and benefits aiming to support individuals and families affected by emergencies. For example, in the context of COVID-19, age cut-offs for access to social benefits have been recorded.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, older people tend to have lower and reduced access to mental health services, so additional measures may be needed to reach out to people who are struggling to cope with displacement and associated losses due to climate change.

Lack of access to information and support also impacts older people's ability to take advantage of energy efficient and green solutions. For example, information on funds available to make adaptations (i.e.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the case during the 2003 heatwave in France, when older persons living in the community were among the main victims, see [https://www.unisdr.org/files/1145\\_ewheatwave.en.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/1145_ewheatwave.en.pdf) and <https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Heatwave-October-2005.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Refer to our COVID-19 and human rights paper

<sup>3</sup> Refer to our COVID-19 and human rights paper

insulation/windows/heat pumps etc.) or changes (i.e. phasing out petrol cars), are complex and frequently require a high level of online access/literacy and are difficult to navigate. There is a crucial need to think about how older people can access these schemes, especially those in vulnerable situations/at risk of exclusion. This is both to make sure they aren't left out of the benefits of these changes, and because their engagement and consent is needed in order to make the changes that are necessary. Age limits in access to credit and credit schemes also impose additional barriers for older persons to make green transitions and necessary adaptations to deal with cold or extreme heat (for example better insulation), or to move into more appropriate and safe housing.

Climate change also affects in sharp ways the everyday life of many older persons. In particular, it may accentuate the risk of loneliness in old age. Due to hot summers, older people – especially those living alone and those without social networks - are less likely to leave their homes and may thus have fewer opportunities to socialise and interact with others. Extreme weather conditions can also impact traditional and cultural practices leading to increased social isolation, reduced opportunities for participation and loss of sense of belonging for older persons.

To address these challenges local planning is crucial. The involvement of older persons in local decision-making is central to address their particular needs and lifestyle. For example, some green/low carbon solutions promoted by cities, such as e-scooters or bicycles are not likely to be accessible for some, or even many, older people. Green spaces need to provide opportunities for older people to socialise, to exercise safely, to rest and remain active. Mobility plans need to address the needs of older people living in urban and suburban areas to remain connected and to have access to basic services.

Inclusion in decision-making is also necessary in disaster and emergency prevention and planning to mitigate the risks discussed earlier. Older people must also be empowered at individual level (for example through information about changes they can make in their personal lifestyles, why these are important and how they can get help, if needed) but also as leaders in their communities, who can mobilise action and participate in discussions to counter the negative effects of climate change. For example, many older people today have experienced times of scarcity and recession in their life and have good knowledge of how to reuse material resourcefully, which can contribute to less waste, more respect of natural resources and forms of sustainable consumerism and tourism. Older people can therefore share their knowledge and experience in their communities and in discussions around circular economy.

## Question 2: Existing policies and legislation

Climate change is the first priority of the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who on 11 December presented her [European Green Deal](#). End of November 2019, the [European Parliament declared "Climate emergency"](#). Still a number of hurdles will have to be overcome soon, starting with budgetary pressures: [a report published by the World Health Organisation](#) shows that *"countries are increasingly prioritising climate change and health, with half of the countries surveyed having developed a national health and climate change strategy or plan. Worryingly, only about 38% have finances in place to even partially implement their national strategy of plan, and fewer than 10% channelling resources to implement it completely"*. At the same time, it looks like [the negotiations around the next EU budget \(2021-2027\) are likely to involve big compromise for climate](#) and the COP25 again shows how much political will and leadership are critical in order to make significant progress.

We are not aware of any concrete legal or policy initiatives that directly target older persons and climate change at EU level, but there are opportunities to link the EU Green Deal with the upcoming Green Paper on Ageing.

### Questions 3 and 4: Data and monitoring

A number of reports and articles underline the potential vulnerability of older persons regarding their exposure to climate change. Yet it is not very easy to gather clear figures about the impacts of climate change on older persons' situations, notably on their health. As mentioned in the recent report of the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, studies and statistics often have age limits or lack adequate disaggregation by age, which makes it difficult to effectively assess the real impact on older persons.

Another reason for the lack of visibility of the impact of climate change on older persons, might be the lack of appropriate and inclusive indicators. For example, the indicator of premature death used to measure SDG Goal 3, excludes people who die from Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) after the age of 70. Moreover, it is striking that the [World Report on Ageing and Health](#) (WHO, 2015), a comprehensive tool mapping the health situation of older persons, does not really consider the impact of climate change on older persons' health. The report mainly focuses on natural disasters and emergency situations, which are indeed one important side of the coin but clearly not the only one. For instance, air pollution is not considered, while the impact of outdoor and indoor air pollution negatively affects older persons' health, especially those people who are already facing chronic diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

So far in Europe, heat waves and heat stress have probably been the most visible issues linked to climate change and older persons, but there is increasing frequency of other extreme weather events such as major storms and flooding. Getting a comprehensive overview would mean considering the exposure of older persons to air pollution (indoor and outdoor), noise, hazardous chemicals and climate change which markedly results in extreme weather conditions (e.g. heat waves with heat stress and water stress impacting the nutritional supply chain). More attention on how the effects of climate change affect older people's everyday life is also needed.

### Questions 5 and 6: Good practices and challenges

Although we did not have enough time to gather several good practices that are representative of the situation across Europe, we wish to share a few examples, one focusing on the participation of older people in local planning for heatwaves, one linking age-friendly communities with action on climate change and another one about campaigning for climate change in the UK and Norway.

#### ***Cologne: development of a "Heat action plan for older people"***<sup>4</sup>

The project's goal is to minimise health risks of heat waves for people over 65 years old. Both science and local administration (health department, environment department, and energy department) are involved in finding collaborative solutions. So far, surveys on the situation in care facilities have been conducted and older people in locality districts have been surveyed about how they receive heat warnings; how they perceive the increase in number of hot days and heat waves and how they perceive health burdens. The project is still in process.

#### ***Greater Manchester Age-Friendly Strategy***<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stadt-koeln.de/artikel/67953/index.html>. Cologne is the biggest city in North-Rhine-Westphalia with more than 1 million inhabitants

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/1166/gm\\_ageing\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/1166/gm_ageing_strategy.pdf)

In the frame of the Greater Manchester Age-Friendly Strategy there is an action aiming to support older people to better manage their energy demands, bringing them out of fuel poverty and contributing to climate change goals.

### ***Grand-parents for the climate***<sup>6</sup>

Examples of older people involved in climate change activism in the UK and in Norway.

## **Question 7: Additional information**

There is a need to address climate change taking due account of the huge diversity amongst the older population, but also geographical and societal differences. For example, southern Europe is expected to be more impacted by the effects of climate change in terms of mortality.<sup>7</sup> However extreme weather events can occur throughout the region, albeit to different degrees and with variable consequences.

Challenges to the rights of older persons are not merely the result of climate change, but are due to persistent prejudice and discrimination in society that drives the marginalisation and exclusion of older persons from policy planning and interventions. As explained above, climate change accentuates these challenges in very significant ways. In order to address these rights violations more comprehensively a new international convention focusing on human rights in old age is necessary. Such an instrument would render these inequalities and disadvantages more visible, it would problematize older persons as rights holders instead of as subjects of assistance and this would therefore facilitate their inclusion and participation. Such a convention would also create concrete and meaningful obligations for the equal enjoyment of human rights in old age, including in the context of climate change.

The age-friendly cities and communities programme of the WHO can contribute to climate change goals, for example supporting healthier choices, which are also environmentally sustainable, such as facilitating the use of public transport, ensuring the availability of parks and sidewalks that are comfortable to walk, and promoting proper home insulation. It would be important to link UN action on climate change with action on age-friendly cities and communities.

Finally, since the UN has recently declared the UN Decade on Healthy Ageing, this may provide an additional opportunity to put older people's rights in the context of climate change in the spotlight.

### **For more information you may contact:**

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<sup>6</sup> [Grandparents taking action on climate change | Campaign against Climate Change \(campaigncc.org\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [2019 annual edition of the Employment and Social Developments in Europe "Sustainable growth for all: choices for the future of social Europe"](#)