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Expanding to new priorities, not forgetting the old ones

AGE Platform Europe's contribution to the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034.

Brussels, 06/05/2025

As a member organisation, AGE supports the position of Social Platform and the European Anti-Poverty Network on the MFF, and has co-signed an joint letter by European Civic Forum for strengthening and shielding European democracy with the upcoming MFF.

General suggestions on the next MFF

The current budgetary framework of the European Union is approaching its end in 2027, and it has been arguably facing the deepest crises that a European budgets have faced: On top of the immediate need for action to prevent climate change and mitigate its impact, the digitalization of the EU economy and long-lasting structural differences in the social and economic opportunities of the EU's regions, it had to be adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic, its health and economic impact, the 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine and its impact on energy security and inflation in Europe, as well as a revolution in the EU's stance in the world, now able to fund military assistance to its neighbour country defending itself from invasion. Now, a further crisis looms with the trade war unleashed by the new US administration and the defunding of vital international assistance programmes in the world and in the EU's immediate neighbourhood.

The EU budget has so far proven to be able to change and to adapt, all while not forgetting about its important priorities. It has continued to fund civil society at European level and across the EU, allowing population groups to speak up and to convey their experiences and demands to decisionmakers at EU level. For example, national governments via the EU have heavily invested in health prevention and health systems after the reckoning that a decade of austerity had reduced its power to stem a global pandemic, such as COVID-19.

However, more efforts are needed. For instance, demographic change as a long-term process creates pressure on public policies, attitudes and funds to change. The European budget should also keep this in account.

Av de Tervueren, Tervurenlaan 168, box 2
1150 Brussels, Belgium, Tel: +32.2.280.14.70
info@age-platform.eu

In the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework, AGE Platform Europe has several suggestions to put forward:

- **To be future-proof, the next Multiannual Financial Framework should take into account and mainstream the work on ageing and demographic change**, following the guidance of UNECE and WHO for example. This should take the form of investing into research projects that can make dignified, healthy and active ageing a reality for a great number of older Europeans; of support to civil society organisations which formulate the needs of an ageing European population; support to employers and trade unions to uphold employment opportunities as workforce shortages meet an ageing workforce; invest in high-quality, accessible and affordable long-term care which upholds independence and autonomy and supports informal carers; invest in health promotion and prevention; train Europeans of all ages to give them access to the advancement of technologies, and encourage the creation and support for accessible, age-friendly environments.

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 1: the size of the post-2027 MFF must be larger than the current MFF and NextGenerationEU together
- Recommendation 3: Keep both horizontal and thematic enabling conditions in the Common Provisions Regulation to ensure accountability and delivery on investments linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights

- **Funding for civil society organisations and citizens' projects should be maintained and further simplified**. Underrepresented groups of every age such as Roma, persons from national minority or migration background, persons with diverse sexual orientations, persons with disabilities, persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion, homeless people, informal carers, persons suffering from various common or less common diseases or conditions and many more would not be able to raise their voice in the technical and abstract world of European policy-making, unless supported The European funds, and in particular the Citizen, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV), Erasmus+, as well as the European Social Fund Plus provide a vital support for them to organise, be informed about EU-level discussion and be able to formulate their input and suggestions into the democratic process of European lawmaking. **It is vital that this capacity of the EU budget is maintained, with all legitimate demands for transparency on what it is spent on. AGE warns of the temptation to impose cumbersome reporting**

requirements which would exclude organisations with lesser administrative capacity to benefit from EU funding.

- **A European spirit can only thrive from the lived and real experience of its citizens and residents with the entity 'Europe'**. These are captured thanks to cross-border education and training programmes such as Erasmus Plus, as well as to the European Social Fund Plus, and to the Cohesion Programmes. Europe can make use of its citizens' skills and resources also via the cascade funding and the financial support to third parties (e.g. under Horizon Europe and CERV - Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programmes), co-financing grassroots small-scale projects with tangible and visible impact. Such initiatives create interest and understanding for the EU and its policies and allow citizens to feel part of a larger European community of values, social inclusion, remembrance and experience. Therefore, these programmes should be maintained, as well as the possibility of people to participate in them – especially those who have the least means themselves to engage in European mobility.
- **Transparency and visibility of the impact of the European budget** to citizens is important for citizens to see it as a common project. Therefore, we support initiatives to make the new MFF more transparent in its impact on different groups of citizens, such as based on gender, age groups, disability or other criteria.

Below, we detail the different recommendations for the programmes as they exist currently, considering that different funding lines can move and be renamed in the next MFF.

Citizens, Rights, Equality and Values Programme: supporting active citizenship, values and remembrance along the lifespan

Civil society brings a vital contribution to European discourse and democracy, if it receives support and recognition. Across the continent, people of all ages provide small and big services to their communities and their families, self-

organise, take part in democratic decision-making as active citizens, are a living testament of European history and values and thus create the greatest treasure of the European Union, its citizens. Yet, an active, transparent and lively civil society needs support to be plural, informed and vocal. Funding civil society means to sustain democracy, to build capacity, to provide for the logistics and professionals directly supporting citizens and their organisations. This is true at local, regional and national level, and even more on European level.

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 9: The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) must be retained as a stand-alone fund supporting a vibrant civil society, supporting, defending and promoting human rights

Relevant Joint Letter:

- Strengthen and shield European democracy with the upcoming MFF

Older persons' organisations in particular face various challenges:

- **Lack of funding**, both from governments and private philanthropy, which often prefers directing funds to more visible initiatives. This constitutes a form of structural ageism: despite age-related discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes being among the most pervasive and socially accepted forms of discrimination, funds are rather oriented to other causes, thus further normalizing ageism and contributing to its invisibility. Despite the huge impact which could be possible through funding, it is not yet widely available as funders may associate ageing with negative stereotypes and conditions, such as loneliness, physical and mental decline, financial hardship, loss of status and community, which are less appealing to funders.
- **Language barriers**: contrary to many younger citizens having grown up in a re-united Europe which supports the learning of foreign languages and an increasing mastery of the EU's most widespread second language – English – older generations, in particular the oldest old, have not had the chance to learn it, creating an important barrier for exchange and the creation of a common approach to a European polity.
- **Digital exclusion**: Many older people have either not worked with information technologies during their working lives or do not have equal access to training to keep up to date with the necessary knowledge and skills. Even though technologies such as automatic translations, collaborative online documents and online meetings exist, many older persons are excluded from using such tools. On top of the needed skills to navigate them, the cost of modern equipment and reliability of digital

connections is still an issue and barrier to a pan-European digital sphere for all citizens.

- **Mobility and accessibility barriers:** despite the EU's high standards in the accessibility of transport and the digital sphere, health and mobility issues make it still complicated for many older persons to engage in mobility and exchange physically in citizen's networks across Europe.

Such systemic limitations confirm the necessity to sustain civil society with EU-level funding to effectively tackle the above-mentioned challenges across the EU. It is moreover key to sustain networks that can support, aggregate and represent the voices of older persons and their organisations at European and international level. The CERV programme and its successor should therefore have **an explicit reference to combating age-based discrimination, in line with the EU treaties, alongside all other grounds of discrimination mentioned in the treaties**. It also remains vital for them to be encouraged to **explore the instances of intersectional discrimination**, such as older women or older persons with migrant background are facing. Funded citizen networks, on age and other grounds, **should be able to continue to adequately organise physical travel and meetings** that enlarge the number of citizens who are able to directly participate in the EU's policy discussions. The barriers outlined above also command that significant resources should be directed towards **interpretation and translation, including services delivered by trained professionals** rather than artificial intelligence which risks being biased and ageist.

The current fund recognises the value of work of volunteers, without which these citizen networks would not be able to function: this recognition should be maintained and expanded to include the efforts contributed to organisations without any paid staff, as a form of in-kind co-funding.

AGE and its member organisations highly value the opportunity to re-grant parts of the Operational Grant provided through CERV to smaller, national projects (the so-called **financial support to third parties**). This innovation of the current MFF has allowed to EU funds to have a direct impact and visibility at grassroots level, bring Europe closer to its citizens. Thanks to such cascade funding (implemented nationally and locally, while being steered at European level), information and actions happened along the whole chains and governance levels, empowering every single actor, providing them with direct responsibility and sense of agency, being it for the organization of awareness-raising at local and national levels, of meetings and conferences of citizens' organisations with national and European decision-makers, or for any other initiative where support is provided, being carefully monitored and geared to deliver results and impact

However, even with this possibility, it is often rather the organisations organised more professionally and better funded who have the capacity to apply, deliver and report on the regranting projects.

AGE calls for maintaining the financial support to third parties (regranting). However, it should be noticed that the requirement to bring in 20% of co-funding to regranted projects creates a significant barrier to inclusion and outreach, as the financial support thus benefits mostly to the richest organizations This requirement should be reduced or abandoned. At the very least, it should be harmonised across the same programme, as CERV-DAPNE and CERV-LITI require only 10% of co-funding, while CERV-Operational Grants (and financial support to third parties) require 20%.

AGE emphasises that the role of civil society organisations is to independently aggregate and convey the voice of their constituents and warns against including any requirement to adopt certain political positions in the work of funded civil society organisations, and to put in limitations such as not contacting public officials with positions representing the legitimate point of view of groups of citizens. However, it should be ensured that all funded civil society organisations share an active commitment to the EU's values enshrined in the Treaties.

European Social Fund Plus: empower people to remain in the labour market, support a life-long learning culture and inclusive society

Demographic ageing has a profound impact on the world of work and social policies should adapt to provide responses to the challenges created by this evolution. The European Social Fund plays a key role in supporting underrepresented groups, such as people of all ages experimenting poverty, to be heard in the EU's processes and to foster the social innovation, the creation and exchange on good practices and their upscaling. An important part of this is the creation of exchange platforms, similar to the past Transnational networks of ESF managing authorities and civil society to further develop experience and learning on social policies.

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 4: The European Social Fund+ (ESF+) must be retained as a stand-alone fund supporting social inclusion
- Recommendation 5: The earmarking for social inclusion under ESF+ should go beyond the current 25% for all Member States

- The next ESF+ should **re-establish a specific objective to foster the employment of older workers** through

innovative practices and projects, support and advice to employers, person-centred job search initiatives, and re-skilling and upskilling that target also this demography. One in five persons between 55 and 64 are not in employment, and particularly women of this age group are excluded from the labour market for various reasons, while a more supportive labour market could help them in finding new employment and not forego the last important years of labour income and pension contributions. **Initiatives should also focus on retention of older people in employment**, such as through career guidance, age management, adapting working conditions and supporting informal carers. **Focus on specific sectors such as live-in carers, health and care professionals can be instrumental** to improve gender equality, support quality care services which enable older persons to stay included, and improve working conditions.

- The next ESF+ should **bring the implementation of the Employment Equality Directive to workplaces** by raising awareness about ageism through large-scale campaign and developing research on ageism in the workplace, fostering a new narrative on ageing and diversity at work, ensuring an intersectional approach reflecting the population diversity, developing disability and age-inclusive workplaces, guarantee older workers' access to their rights and are empowered to claim them and support rehabilitation and reintegration into the workplace after periods of absence from the labour market, such as in the case of disease, disability or informal care provision.
- The skills policies promoted by ESF+ should aim to address the **lack of opportunities and barriers to the participation of older people in education, training and life-long learning**. With currently only 19.2% of people 55-64 having participated in education or training over a 12-month period the reality is still far from the EPSR Action Plan objective of achieving 60%.
- The new ESF+ could have a **stronger intergenerational element**, such as by raising awareness on the added value of multigenerational teams, supporting mentorship schemes between older and younger workers and vice-versa, especially in times of a large share of workers being right before retirement age and in the context of the digital transition and the associated rapid change in work environments
- The next ESF+ should include **objectives to support informal carers** with support services, short-term care services, training, counselling and peer support to help them in their care duties, prevent physical and mental health issues linked to the informal care and the social isolation which often accompanies it and allow them to integrate care into their

working and private lives, and in fostering more flexible working conditions.

- The next **ESF+ should be open to develop and upscale practices to prevent social isolation and loneliness**, a phenomenon which people of all ages face – since the pandemic also increasingly young people. For older persons, feelings of loneliness are often harder to overcome because of mobility or health issues and a reduced social network, and therefore tend to have a severe impact on their mental and physical health. Intergenerational exchange or solidarity programmes as well as community support can bring an important contribution to preventing and addressing loneliness.

Erasmus Plus: support adult education, learning and mobility along the lifespan

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 13: Increase funding for Erasmus+ fivefold to ensure accessibility for young people [and people of all ages – AGE addition]

Without doubt, Erasmus Plus is the most widely known and most successful programme of the European Union, funding not only student mobility, but also the European Solidarity Corps, exchanges and mutual learning at all levels of education, including non-formal adult education. Some older people's organisations have benefitted from Erasmus Plus to develop important trainings, apps, manuals or handbooks on activating talents of the oldest old, to combat ageism or to reimagine neighbourhoods. The existence of this programme therefore supports all generations and is a real lever to help older people to bring in and make visible their contributions to society.

Yet, it is complicated for smaller organisations to access these funds for various reasons such as bureaucracy, language issues, the lack of accessibility of the digital platform. Some Erasmus streams, such as on capacity-building, still require 20% co-funding, which further creates a barrier for smaller organisations.

- The new **Erasmus+ should continue to include a funding line for adult education, inherited from the former Grundtvig programme**, and be accessible to smaller organisations which have the capacity to work with ordinary citizens, making them also benefit from the spirit of European integration.

- The reintroduction of **mobility funding for adult learners** (and not only adult education staff) would have the potential to greatly expand the number of potential beneficiaries from the programme
- The programme should be **more accessible to smaller organisations** with lower co-funding requirements and tools for easier access.
- In line with Commissioner Micallef's mission to develop an Intergenerational Fairness Strategy, the next **Erasmus+ programme could also develop a specific action on promoting solidarity between generations**, a value founded in the EU's treaties. Erasmus+ projects could therefore receive an additional incentive to bring generations together and overcome barriers that have become higher since the pandemic and reinforced through the increasing move of social life into digital spaces.

EU4Health Programme: strengthen health promotion and prevention, address workforce shortages and service delivery

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation Ensure strong and sustained EU investment in health to build resilient and accessible healthcare systems. Propose a well-financed successor to EU4Health

The EU4Health programme was heavily upscaled after the pandemic, and rightly so because much of the impact of the pandemic could have been better mitigated, had the health sector not been underfunded over the 2010-2020 decade. This also concerned the EU's Health Programme which was downscaled in the current MFF, just to be transformed into EU4Health in 2021. This emphasises that it is inefficient to reduce spending in health; at the contrary, a healthier European population is economically more active, pays higher taxes and contributions, takes less time off to care for close relatives with health issues – health is one of the most efficient social investments.

- Beyond crisis preparedness, the next EU Health Programme should fully **embrace the mission to increase Healthy Life Years**, which have been stagnating for more than a decade.
- This means **directing more funding into health promotion and disease prevention**. While it is laudable to invest massively into 'Beating Cancer' **many more widespread diseases, from musculoskeletal to cardio-**

vascular and neurodegenerative, have an important impact on people's health as they age and weigh on their quality of life, chances to fully participate in society and on public and private budgets. Addressing them can help reduce mortality, increase healthy life years and alleviate public spending.

- In terms of research, funding should better explore the effects of **polymedication**, which older persons are facing to a higher degree than other groups and the **differences in symptoms, diseases and treatment and between older women and men.**
- In the context of ageing, there is a particular **shortage of health and care workforce.** Geriatricians, nurses, long-term care workers and specialists are lacking and there are territories without adequate coverage by general practitioners, let alone hospitals. A specific initiative of the next Health Programme should address these shortcomings.

Horizon Europe: research and innovation enabling longer, healthier and more active lives

The EU's research and innovation programme has a tremendous role to play in supporting innovation that can empower Europeans to lead healthier and more active lives, as well as promoting social inclusion, and has done so in the past. AGE has been active in various Horizon projects and can share experiences about the priorities and technicalities of the calls stemming from the programme

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 6: Recognise the value of public investment in research beyond industrial competitiveness. The EU needs a successor to Horizon Europe that supports research in the areas of social inclusion and fundamental rights, with the aim of improving the wellbeing of its people.

- The predecessor programme, Horizon 2020, had a specific objective to increasing healthy life years of Europeans by two years. This gave rise to several ground-breaking research projects on age-friendly environments, prevention of diseases and other hazards in later life. **Fixing a visionary objective such as increasing healthy life years, or reducing the current gender gap of three years in the number of years spent in bad health, will help drive innovation in this sense.**
- Research can only make an impact if it is applicable. AGE promotes co-creation, co-design and the participation of citizens or end users in projects that are aiming to bring them an improvement, product or service. **The EU research programme should continue to include requirements for participative research in its clauses.**

- In the current context of climate, energy and housing crises, older people are among the most marginalised and disproportionately affected groups, with serious consequences on their health, standard of living and access to essential services necessary for a life in dignity. **It is therefore crucial that future Horizon funding takes into account the challenges faced by older people in today's environmental and geopolitical landscape, by allocating dedicated support for civil society participation – including that of older persons – in research programmes.**
- Planning is essential in research, alongside with ensuring a proper timeframe for implementation. If this is key for big organizations, it is equally true for smaller ones, whose participation can be further hindered by uncertainty on expected calls for proposals and by a limited frame for actions. **Longer and more predictable timelines** (such as fixed publication dates and extended deadlines, that also consider the inevitable challenging periods around festivities and summer holidays) **will deliver more quality and more impact, especially when researching.**

InvestEU/Recovery and Resilience Facility Investment for an ageing Europe

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 3: Keep both horizontal and thematic enabling conditions in the Common Provisions Regulation to ensure accountability and delivery on investments linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights

While InvestEU was initially designed to support economic innovation and competitiveness, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), NextGenerationEU and subsequent investment programmes (RepowerEU, …) also included important investment objectives regarding policies that directly affect citizens, such as increasing capacity of public health, a cleaner environment and mobility. However, stakeholder involvement proved difficult in the RRF and it remains unclear how certain EU policy objectives, such as deinstitutionalisaiton of persons with disabilities, were promoted in the relevant funding lines on long-term care and public health. The next investment programme should aim for high standards in terms of civil dialogue at EU, national and regional level.

Enabling conditions, civil society involvement in setting the priorities and delivering the projects under these funds should be strengthened. This will

also increase the visibility of where EU funds are going, all the more if they are funded by common European bonds and therefore spread an investment effort across several generations.

Funding for the green transition, resilience, climate change mitigation and adaptation

The EU has an important contribution to bring in steering our economic path towards one that respects our planets' capacities for regeneration and has taken decisive actions in this sense with NextGenerationEU, the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund.

For the acceptability of these policies it is crucial that citizens of all ages can feel that they can take part in this transition. On the labour market, this implies proactive skills policies that reach all generations of workers. In the investment in public infrastructure and the environment, efforts should be made to reach all generations, for instance:

- Older tenants are more likely to have been living in the same place for many years, without having benefitted from investments into energy efficiency. Public funding should encourage homeowners and social housing providers to **better invest in the environmental performance of their rented-out housing**.
- The same is true regarding the **energy performance of older homeowners' housing**. If European funds are used to encourage for insulation and energy efficiency in buildings, it should be made accessible to older persons, who often are excluded from receiving credit based on the assumption of a higher mortality risk for covering credit with life insurance. Both of these measures also have a positive impact on the vulnerability of older persons to heat waves and heat shocks.
- Older persons are one of the groups primarily affected by climate change. For instance, older people living in residential care are facing the **impact**

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 7: A more comprehensive framework on Just Transition is needed with a broader geographical focus and strong social conditionalities. The focus of the Just Transition Fund should be expanded beyond employment to address the broader social needs of disadvantaged groups impacted by the green transition and align with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights
- Recommendation 8: Increase the Social Climate Fund budget. Ensure that 100% of revenues from ETS2 are allocated to the SCF and extend it beyond the year 2032, to effectively mitigate its social consequences.

of heat waves and may have a higher risk of being the associated health issues. These facilities should be prioritised in public insulation and energy efficiency policies. Similarly, public buildings such as libraries and administrations should be encouraged to propose 'cool spots' during hot periods and promote them among older persons to take a rest in a more comfortable climate as their homes.

- Investment into **improved public transport and climate-friendly forms of mobility** should take older persons into account and be fully accessible to persons with disabilities. EU funds should be targeted towards maintaining mobility in more sparsely populated regions, to ensure all can reach the necessary essential goods and services to live in dignity (health care, administration, shopping, venues to socialise and to participate in cultural activities etc.)
- Investment should further be **targeted on communities and environments which are more densely populated** to provide for age-friendly and accessible environments, sufficient green spaces and including places to get refreshed during hot days and warm during cold periods. These increase the resilience to the changing weather conditions, increase quality of life, and foster healthy and active lifestyles that are essential for healthy ageing.

Cohesion Fund: maintain dignifying living conditions in all of the EU's territories

The points outlined above specifically on climate change should also be encouraged via the EU's Cohesion Funding. In addition, **Cohesion funding should address the risk of digital exclusion and the depopulation of rural areas**. Indeed, as goods and service provision is increasingly moving online, small city centres, administration, healthcare providers and shops in more sparsely populated areas are shutting down, reinforcing a rural exodus which leaves mainly older people remaining in these areas. Cohesion Funding should implement the European promise of harmonised standards of living across the EU and therefore address this issue.

Relevant recommendations from Social Platform which AGE supports:

- Recommendation 2: Cohesion Policy must remain a key pillar of the MFF, and its partnership principle should be retained and reinforced.

About AGE Platform Europe

AGE Platform Europe is the largest European network of non-profit organizations of and for older people. We elevate older people's voices, bringing their experiences and aspirations to the table to celebrate aging and fight for equality at all ages.

More information: www.age-platform.eu

Contact: Philippe Seidel, Policy Manager for Social and Economic Policies, philippe.seidel@age-platform.eu

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