

Report

AGE Platform Europe Annual Conference

“Lead with us” – Turning 25 Years of Advocacy into Action for the Rights of Older Persons

AGE Platform Europe

9 June 2026

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Advancing a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons: European Dialogue on Regional Engagement

Introduction

On 9 June 2026, AGE Platform Europe organised its Annual Conference *"Lead with us" – Turning 25 Years of Advocacy into Action*. The conference brought together older persons' organisations, representatives from the European Commission and European Parliament, EU Member States, United Nations bodies, civil society organisations (CSOs), academia, and national human rights institutions (NHRIs) to discuss Europe's role in advancing a United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. As the intergovernmental negotiations have started this year, the focus of the Convention has shifted from *why* it is needed to *how* it will be shaped to deliver real change in the daily lives of older persons.

> *"Older people, especially those who are very old, like me, experience violations of our rights every day. I believe that an international Convention would give us strength and empower us to advocate for our rights whenever we feel that our rights are being violated, allowing us to defend and claim our rights as we should."*
>
> *Merce Mas, FATEC, Spain*

One of the main objectives of the conference was to increase political momentum and stronger coordination among EU institutions, Member States,

and civil society organisations (CSOs), supported by practical proposals for inclusive consultation and regional cooperation to inform the drafting process.

The conference was particularly timely as the first substantive session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Human Rights of Older Persons (IGWG), was held at the United Nations in Geneva from 13 to 17 July 2026. The IGWG – which is mandated to elaborate a new legally binding instrument – marked the formal start of the intergovernmental negotiations.

During AGE's Annual Conference, the discussions demonstrated growing momentum within Europe to engage in the drafting of a legally binding international instrument to protect the human rights of older persons. Speakers consistently emphasised that older persons must remain at the centre of the process. They shared perspectives on how the European Union could play a more active role in shaping the future Convention. Bringing together the expertise of its institutions, experience across Member States and the views of civil society organisations (CSOs) representing and working with older persons in their full diversity, the EU is well placed to promote a rights-based, inclusive and ambitious approach to the drafting process. The development of a new legally binding instrument presents an opportunity to:

- Strengthen the protection of older persons' rights in line with EU treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy;
- Promote and defend the EU policy and legislative framework;
- Increase collaboration across European stakeholders in advancing this shared human rights agenda;
- Align with the EU's vision of a Union of Equality, which seeks to ensure equal rights, participation and opportunities for all people, regardless of age.

"For me, an ambitious UN Convention on the rights of older persons must include the rights to autonomy and to live

independently in our own communities. This matters because too often as people get older, decisions start to be made about them, rather than with them."

Mai Quaid, National President, Active Retirement Ireland

In addition to the speakers of the conference, AGE compiled a series of testimonies from older people and other experts. The videos are available at the links below:

- Voices in Action I: Championing Change
- Voices in Action II: Raising Ambition

European Leadership Towards a UN Convention

The European Commission: Strengthening Engagement Towards a Union of Equality

Opening the conference, Eva Schultz, Member of Cabinet of Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu, reaffirmed the European Commission's commitment to promoting equality, social rights and inclusion throughout the life course. The discussion highlighted the close links between the proposed Convention and broader EU priorities, including demographic change, quality employment, social rights and preparedness.

We have as a framework the whole Union of Equality: our responsibility for and our daily work to think differently about ageing, to fight stereotypes, to fight age-based discrimination, to rather promote diversity and inclusion in everything from the workplace to society at large, in health or housing."

Eva Schultz, Member of Cabinet of Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu

In the closing session, Carles Dedeu Fontcuberta, Deputy Head of Unit at Directorate General JUST D1, explained that the Commission will be closely monitoring developments together with the European External Action Service. Additionally, he highlighted that the Commission sees important opportunities to create synergies between the UN process and existing EU legislation, including equality policies and demographic initiatives. Future discussions will determine how these links can best support the negotiations. AGE continues to engage with the European Commission, calling for its continued engagement and stronger leadership in the process. The UN Convention provides a unique opportunity to advance the Union of Equality while reaffirming the EU's responsibility to enhance the human rights of older persons.

Regional Leadership in Action

In the roundtable 2 on *Regional Leadership in Action: Building Commitments Towards a UN Convention*, Christina Meinecke, representing the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to the European Union, recalled the January 2026 regional meeting organised in collaboration with AGE Platform Europe to improve awareness about the ongoing negotiations and to strengthen European engagement. One of the conclusions was that the new legally binding instrument is a significant opportunity for the EU and its Member States to reaffirm their commitment to multilateralism and to demonstrate collective leadership on ageing and human rights.

Drawing lessons from previous conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Christina Meinecke emphasised the **value of early regional coordination and sustained engagement**.

Without this Convention, older people will continue to be sidelined, forced to rely on the goodwill of others rather than being recognised as autonomous individuals who hold the power

to stand up for themselves. I believe a United Nations Convention on the rights of older persons is important because there is a gap on ageism and age discrimination in the existing nine core human rights instruments of the United Nations human rights system."

Theresia Degener, retired Professor of Law and Disability studies and former chair of UN CRPD Committee

Mobilising Political Support: the European Parliament's Contribution

MEP Idoia Mendia argued that EU institutions each have distinct but complementary roles:

- The European Parliament can maintain political momentum and public visibility;
- The European Commission can provide policy expertise and ensure coherence with EU legislation and equality policies;
- The Council can facilitate coordination among Member States;
- The European External Action Service can reinforce the Convention within the EU's external human rights agenda.

MEP Idoia Mendia stressed that ageing should not be viewed as a niche issue but as central to Europe's future competitiveness and social cohesion. She also highlighted several priorities for the negotiations:

- Reflecting the diversity of ageing experiences;
- Incorporating changing family structures and migration;
- Integrating a gender perspective;
- Ensuring broad civil society participation beyond organisations specialising in ageing.

From Commitment to Action: EU Member States in the Drafting Process

Slovenia's Long-Standing Leadership in Advancing a Convention

In the opening session, Ambassador Barbara Sušnik underlined Slovenia's long-standing leadership in supporting a new UN Convention. As the first EU Member State to openly support the initiative, Slovenia continues to play a central role within both the former Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing, which concluded its mandate in 2024 and the new Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG) established in 2025.

She argued that the Convention should cover the full spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms while building upon existing regional frameworks such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The Ambassador also stressed that strong **EU engagement is essential to ensure that the Convention reflects European values and human rights standards**. She concluded with a powerful reminder that denying rights to older persons today means denying everyone a dignified future.

Austria on Strengthening Coordination Among Member States

In the second panel on *Regional Leadership in Action: Building Commitments Towards a UN Convention*, Christoph Angster described Austria's experience in supporting the Convention process since 2018. He recognised the decisive contribution of AGE Platform Europe and its members in transforming what was once a specialist discussion into a broader social movement.

He emphasized that **Member States have a responsibility to act as bridges between citizens and international negotiations by ensuring that lived experiences are reflected in national positions**.

> *"The Convention should focus on the well-being and tackling social exclusions, through the strengthening of public policies, and also through greater attention to vulnerabilities, and chronic*

conditions, which are key indicators by which we measure our societies"

Tania Scacchetti, General Secretary of the Italian Pensioners' Union

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He called for **stronger European coordination through regular exchanges between Member States, the European Commission, the Council, national authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs) and national human rights institutions (NHRIs).** Increasing national capacities and creating spaces where these actors can work together would significantly strengthen Europe's contribution to the Convention.

From Dialogue to Coordination

Drahoslav Stefanek, Chair of the Council Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM), outlined discussions currently taking place among Member States. Following the July session, he affirmed that internal discussions will continue within the COHOM. He also mentioned that the **European Commission is an important interlocutor with the COHOM**. Regarding the mandate of the European Union in getting actively engaged on the UN Convention drafting process, Drahoslav Stefanek explained that the mandate needs to be proposed by the European Commission, to then be approved by the Council.

A Call to Commit – AGE's Initiative to Submit a Pledge

During the Annual Conference, AGE presented its call for pledges inviting Member States, civil society organisations, NHRIs, equality bodies and other stakeholders to submit public pledges outlining their contributions to the Convention process. These commitments demonstrate that drafting a Convention is a shared responsibility requiring action at local, national, European and global levels.

If you wish to make your contribution to the Convention visible, you can submit a pledge here.

Civil Society's Central Role in Shaping the Convention

In the opening session, the UN Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Older Persons, Zvezdan Pirtošek, stressed that civil society organisations, particularly AGE Platform Europe and its members, play an essential role by identifying protection gaps, providing expertise and ensuring that international discussions reflect everyday realities. This was echoed in the first roundtable – *From Grassroots Voices to Global Norms* – focused on how older people's voices and lived experiences are at the forefront of shaping the Convention.

> *"Civil society often notices emerging problems before institutions like the United Nations or the European Union do it. It identifies gaps between policy and lived experiences. It brings forward voices that might otherwise remain unheard."*
>
> *UN Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Older Persons*

Embedding Participation in Decision-Making: Spain's Experience

Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna from the Plataforma de Mayores y Pensionistas (PMP) presented Spain's consultative body on the Convention, established in October 2025 to prepare the country's positions ahead of each Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG) session. Meeting every two months, the Advisory Council brings together representatives from government, civil society organisations (CSOs) of older persons, disability organisations, academia and human rights experts. Its work covers four main areas:

- Development of substantive positions;
- Coordination at international, European and Latin American levels;
- Drafting proposals;
- Communication, awareness-raising and advocacy.

Manuel Veguín Garcia from IMSERSO, the Institute for Older People and Social Services, recorded a video message explaining how IMSERSO leads this consultative body and other initiatives they are taking at national level.

The Advisory Council ensures that older people's perspectives and lived experiences are brought to the negotiating table and reflected throughout the drafting process. This approach highlights the importance of the meaningful participation of older persons, ensuring that those most affected by the Convention have a direct voice in shaping it.

Several lessons emerged from the Spanish experience:

- Making full use of the expertise of organisations representing older persons;
- Building close partnerships with public authorities is key.

Spain also highlighted the important contribution of **AGE Platform Europe's regranting programme**, which enabled advocacy activities, including a parliamentary event supporting the Convention.

These practices demonstrate that meaningful participation, strong institutional partnerships, and coordinated advocacy are essential to ensuring that the voices of older persons are not only heard but actively shape the future Convention.

"For us, an ambitious Convention needs to include the fill participation of older people. And this means in all situations that concern us. From having a proper place in decision-making process to transport, care, housing, health, education, digital accessibility, and so on."

Moira Allan, Old'Up, France

Belgium: Building Broad National Alliances

Chris Serroyen from the Association for Seniors in Flanders and Brussels (OKRA) explained how - despite Belgium's complex federal structure –civil society

organisations representing older persons were able to develop common positions. Using the Federal Advisory Council for Older People as a platform, organisations from different linguistic communities prepared a joint submission to the Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG). Years of cooperation between civil society organisations (CSOs), national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and equality bodies have created strong consensus around the need for a UN Convention.

Future priorities include documenting age discrimination at national level, developing "experienced expertise" from older persons themselves, and addressing issues such as mandatory retirement, discrimination in disability-related benefits after retirement and remaining exemptions within EU anti-discrimination legislation.

In his presentation, Khaled Hassine, Secretary of the Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG), explained that meaningful participation of older persons extends well beyond formal negotiations in Geneva.

While the Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG) sessions provide opportunities to present evidence and recommendations in the future Convention, civil society engagement should continue before, during and after the sessions. Importantly, Khaled Hassine encouraged organisations to engage directly with their national governments and delegations. **Influencing national positions before representatives arrive in Geneva may be one of the most effective ways for civil society to shape the future Convention.**

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs): Partners in Shaping the Convention

In the first panel, Anna Chabiera, expert at the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of Poland, explained the role of NHRIS. Although publicly funded, NHRIs operate independently from governments and monitor the implementation of human rights obligations. Through complaints handling, research and monitoring, they gather evidence of rights violations affecting older persons and formulate recommendations for governments.

At European level, the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) established a dedicated Working Group on the Human Rights of Older Persons in 2021, while Equinet and the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) have created similar mechanisms. Cooperation among these networks and CSOs facilitates evidence sharing, policy development and coordinated advocacy. Throughout this work, collaboration with civil society organisations remains indispensable, something also highlighted by another speaker, Caroline Emmer De Albuquerque Green from Oxford University.

Caroline Emmer De Albuquerque Green also mentioned that the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons is the first international legally binding instrument to be drafted in the new age of artificial intelligence (AI). She then gave some examples on how AI could help engage older persons in the drafting process and enhance civil society participation, notably by addressing language and mobility barriers, if AI is developed from the start with the participation of older persons themselves.

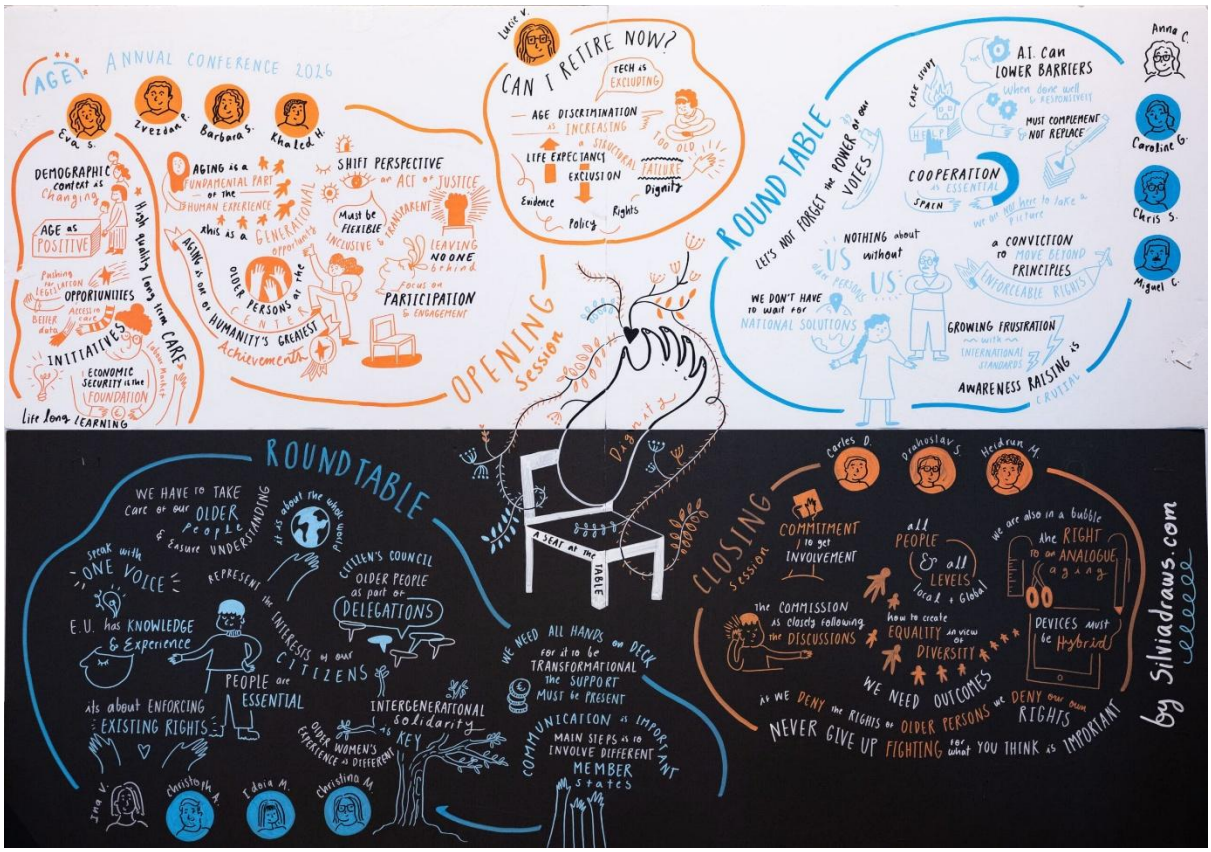
> *"Right now, many individuals do not have the tools or the backing to fight back age discrimination. Without this Convention, older people will continue to be sidelined, forced to rely on the good will of others, rather than being recognised as autonomous individuals who hold the power to stand up for themselves."*
>
> *Guido Cuyvers, Vlaamse Ouderenraad, Belgium*

Live Illustration

During the conference, the artist Silvia Alba created a live illustration capturing the key themes, discussions, and messages that emerged during the event. Her visual reflection brings together the main points raised by speakers, offering a creative and accessible overview of the conversations.

"This is a visual reflection of what was discussed. The most important point I heard today is that older persons must have a seat at the table in discussions on the UN Convention, to ensure that the lived realities of older age are reflected in the proposed convention text."

Silvia Alba, Artist



[Click here to view the illustration in more detail]

Looking Ahead

Closing the conference, AGE Platform Europe President Heidrun Mollenkopf summarised several overarching messages.

- Civil society must remain involved at all stages of drafting at local, national, regional and global levels, ensuring continuous interaction between these different arenas;
- Equality must be understood alongside increasing diversity. The Convention should guarantee equal rights while recognising the different realities experienced by older persons, including those who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination;
- Participation must lead to tangible results. Listening to older persons is essential, but maintaining trust requires that their contributions influence outcomes.

> *"It is highly important that the Convention lays the standards for the rights of older people, including older women in their huge diversity. It really matters because older women are largely invisible."*
>
> *Maria Petkova, Older Women's Network Europe, Bulgaria*

She encouraged all participants to continue discussing the Convention within their own communities, translate international debates into everyday realities and work with governments to shape national positions ahead of future negotiations.

The conference demonstrated broad consensus that Europe has both the opportunity and the responsibility to play a leading role in the development of a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. Speakers consistently called for stronger coordination between EU institutions, Member States, civil society organisations, national human rights institutions and older persons themselves.

The legitimacy and effectiveness of the future Convention will depend on ensuring that older persons remain active participants throughout the drafting process, and that their lived experiences shape a legal instrument capable of

guaranteeing equal rights, dignity and inclusion for current and future generations. As the Annual Conference also celebrated AGE's 25 years of commitment to advancing the rights of older persons, it marked a moment of renewed momentum, with the EU well-placed to play a leading role in shaping a legally binding instrument that can deliver lasting change for current and future generations.

Useful resources

- AGE Platform Europe webpage on the UN Convention
- Recording of the AGE Annual Conference 2026
- Call for pledges to support the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons
- Video testimony – *Voices in Action I: Championing Change*
- Video testimony – *Voices in Action II: Raising Ambition*
- Video pledge by Manuel Venguin Garcia, head of International Relations, IMSERSO, Spain
- AGE's contribution to the call for input

You can stop the perpetuation of ageism!

Please read our one-pager on communicating on older persons in a non-stereotypical way.

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 voice, bringing their experience and aspirations to the table to celebrate ageing and fight for equality at all ages.

Contact

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