

AGE Platform Europe Annual Conference 2019

REPORT

Equality and participation in older age: What role for social protection and education?

13 June, Brussels

Enhancing equal participation of older persons in society



Key messages from the European Commission and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights

To set the scene of the discussions in his video message **Michael O’Flaherty**, Director of the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), stressed the prevalence of ageism across Europe and the importance of using human rights as a tool to combat ageist attitudes and practices in all areas of life. As an illustration, he emphasised the 37% gender gap in pensions as a human rights issue. To ensure equal participation in European societies, Mr. O’Flaherty emphasised the importance to pursue the implementation and promotion of positive initiatives at EU level, such as the EU Pillar of Social Rights and the European structural and investment funds.



*Michael O’Flaherty,
Fundamental Rights
Agency*

Sharing the perspective of the European Commission, **Johan ten Geuzendam**, Adviser at DG Justice and Consumers, echoed the need to apply a rights-based approach towards ageing in European policy making, stressing that demographics is one of the core topics of discussion in Member States and is crucial to keep in mind in the process of shaping EU policies. He underlined how the EU contributes to the protection of older people’s rights, through the non-discrimination directives and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, statistics about life expectancy and health, and work done in international frameworks such as the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). He encouraged AGE Platform members to continue their work to raise the voice of older people in Europe and internationally, and to take the opportunity of the political changes at EU level to ensure that governments take proactive steps to address the legal gaps and ensure older people can enjoy their human rights. Mr. ten Geuzendam specifically encouraged AGE members to address national governments with European and international issues regarding ageing.



*Johan ten Geuzendam,
European Commission*



Panel 1: Social protection in old age – for all?



Liz Mestheneos, 50+
Hellas

The discussion on social protection was introduced by **Liz Mestheneos** of 50+ Hellas and allowed the audience to gain insight and learn about national practices and their effect on older people. The discussion addressed the consequences of complex pension systems and reforms, the effectiveness of civil movements to put pressure on governments and observations of the European Commission in relation to social systems in Member States.

Martin Engman from the Swedish Federations for Seniors (**SPF**) explained how the complex pension system in Sweden has contributed to a lack of trust in the system among a large part of the population. His organisation suggests that financial resources should be increased and that a thorough review simplifies the system. There are age limits, such as a cut-off age for survivor's pensions, that skew the system and benefit increases are not in line with the increase of living costs.



Martin Engman,
Swedish Federation
for Seniors



Ettore Marchetti,
European
Commission

The European Commission is aware of the complexity of national pension systems, stated **Ettore Marchetti**, Policy officer on Pensions and Active Ageing at DG Employment and Social Affairs. He explained that the Commission is aware that pensions are not enough for many older people and to address this issue a non-binding recommendation on social protection has been proposed. In addition, the Commission will try to identify good practices that can be replicated by other Member States. Other Commission initiatives, such as efforts to reconcile employment and care are of major importance to allow people to build more adequate pensions.

One of the main outcomes of the discussions was that direct action and activism can be instrumental to motivate and inform people about their right to sufficient social protection. This was mainly emphasised by **Michel Huisman** from the citizen's movement Le Gang de Vieux on Colère (Gang of Angry Old) in Belgium. This informal group of like-minded senior activists has been able to attract high attention from national media channels in Belgium. What motivates them is the growing realization that many people are unaware of the low living conditions that await them when they reach old age. Their non-violent actions have for instance involved occupying McDonalds and an Apple store in Brussels to protest against low taxation of major international companies through loopholes allowing for aggressive tax avoidance, which has the effect of depriving public budgets from resources to finance adequately their social protection systems.

A horizontal issue that was raised by all the panellists was the importance to address the existing gender pension gap in Europe that continues to be a burning issue in many countries.

Panel 2: The right to education, training and life-long learning



Ciaran McKinney, Age & Opportunity

‘What do we want to achieve with life-long learning? Is it just to keep people occupied or is it about achieving change?’ **Ciaran McKinney** from Age & Opportunity, Ireland, started the discussion by posing these questions to the audience to emphasise the value that life-long learning brings to social participation, health and well-being.

According to **Alana Officer**, from the World Health Organisation, *‘education and life-long learning have positive impacts on relationships, civic engagements and work life’*. She pointed out the urgent need to shift the perspective that age is a barrier and stressed that policy makers must realise that a supportive environment is one of the key factors to ensure that life-long learning is accessible for old people. In turn, it is shown that life-long learning has positive outcomes in terms of health and social inclusion, and people’s resilience to adapt to changes in life, such as widowhood.



Alana Officer, World Health Organisation



Gina Ebner, European Association for the Education of Adults

A recurrent challenge faced by **Gina Ebner**, Secretary General of the European Association for the Education of Adults is the persisting argument that adult education would not be the best use of public funds. Often, adult education projects only remain at the stage of a project. She suggested that health strategies and other relevant areas need to include education and life-long learning aspects to ensure that this remains a continuous priority. We need to move away from the approach where monetary return on investment in adult education is the primary focus. Often, older people are not included in the focus groups that adult education is tasked to reach.

“A leading Irish brain scientist started her university education in her 40s and had to face the question why she did not want to leave her place to someone younger. It was assumed that she would not have a serious career after her studies”

- Ciaran McKinney from Age & Opportunity, Ireland

AGE members voiced their difficulty to ensure that adult education is recognised as an important policy area. They also raised the dire lack of resources in this specific area in some Member States.

One of the key outcomes from this discussion was that ageist attitudes create structural barriers for older people to access education and life-long learning. Internal ageism among older people themselves also restrain them to engage in education in later life.

In her response, **Martina Ni-Chellaigh**, Senior Expert for Skills, VET and adult learning at DG Employment and Social Affairs at the European Commission, admitted that adult education is the ‘poor child’ of education policies, although the EU it is promoting adult education through the Europe 2020 strategy. Attempts have been made by the Commission to create policies on EU level on life-long learning, but there is a strong reluctance from member states who consider this to be a national competence. For example a recommendation was adopted in 2016 on [upskilling pathways](#) that received the support from all Member States. However, it remains a challenge to include older people in this initiative as a target group, as the employed and unemployed are much easier to reach through employment services. The European Pillar of Social Rights includes a right to life-long learning as an important aspiration.



*Martina Ni-Chellaigh,
European Commission*

Reactions & suggestions for the future



To bring different perspectives to the discussion, three panellists from different organisations were invited to share their experiences and react on the topics raised by the previous speakers.



*Edmundo Martinho,
Santa Casa da
Misericórdia & UN ECE
WG on Ageing*

Edmundo Martinho, Chair of the Working Group on Ageing of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) commented on the fact that we often see ageing as a problem, while we should view increasing longevity as something positive. The International Day of Awareness on Elder Abuse, 15 June, should be used to highlight not only direct abuse such as violence or neglect, but also the failure to address inequalities as a form of abuse.

A shared reaction by the panellists was that any regulation, recommendation and policy framework must have a rights-based approach to ageing. An example of such a framework is the [European Social Charter](#) that includes a specific article on social protection of older persons (Article 23). **Humbert de Biolley**, Deputy head of the Council of Europe (CoE) Liaison office with the EU explained how they look at ageing from the perspective of rights. He raised the important role of the [Committee of Social Rights](#) and the possibility for NGOs such as AGE to submit collective complaints. Article 23 was last examined by the Committee in 2017 where the Committee found that most of the situations of non-conformity were related to the level of old age pensions, which was found to be inadequate in States Parties, even when taking into account all additional resources available (contributory and non-contributory benefits, and other complementary benefits available to elderly persons). The Committee has also examined in the past several collective complaints related, inter alia, to pension reforms in Greece. He encouraged AGE members to take advantage of this opportunity to transform the existing rights in the Social Charter into practice for the benefit of members and the ageing population.



Humbert de Biolley, Council of Europe



Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, European Commission

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, Director for Social Affairs, DG Employment and Social Affairs, brought the attention of the audience to the issue of social exclusion and stressed that this aspect must be considered when discussing education and social protection of older people. She explained that the Commission tries to address the issues of social exclusion and loneliness. She clarified that a strategic dialogue with civil society on this issue, including specific contributions from AGE Platform will be key in this process.

Ms Ivanković-Knežević echoed an important aspect that was raised in the discussion on education and life-long learning, namely the need for a more integrated approach where employment, health and education policies are more interlinked with social systems. She emphasised the main achievements of the European Commission in recent years – the Upskilling Pathways recommendation, the Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers and the European Accessibility Act. Especially the question of mainstreaming accessibility in all goods and services is important for this integrative approach. Some initiatives are still pending, such as the next Multiannual Financial Framework for the EU, which could strongly contribute to fund positive initiatives in support of active and healthy ageing.

She recommended AGE members to contact their national governments just as much as the EU to push for active ageing policies. The Commission in turn will continue its strategic dialogue with civil society.