

UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing
"Ensuring a society for all ages: Promoting quality of life and active ageing"
19-20 September 2012, Vienna

Contribution of Dirk Jarré to the 3rd expert panel on
"Creating an enabling environment for health, independence and ageing in dignity"

I would like to address the abbreviated topic of this panel "Creating an enabling environment for ageing in dignity" from a special and more general angle and emphasize less technical aspects. Let me start with the old but very meaningful saying "Age is a matter of mind. If you don't mind it does not matter." It points to the fact that there is nothing like "Age" or "The Aged". We start ageing at the moment of our birth and go on ageing over the whole life-course until we leave this world. To identify "The Aged" or use the absolute notion of "Age" is indeed a matter of mind and depends, with all the attributes we connect with this terminology, of how we perceive the structure of our society and the status of people living in it.

The title of this Ministerial Conference "Ensuring a society of all ages" certainly invites us to reflect on the present orientation of our society and its possible future. It encourages us to develop a vision of the conditions we want to live under in the future and what we want future generations to experience.

No doubt, we live in times of fast and far reaching change. There is tremendous scientific and technological change, there are the changes triggered off by globalization, new ways and means of communication change our life intensely, high mobility and new migration patterns change societal structures, then we also see enormous demographic changes in a short time span, and last but not least important deep societal changes are caused by the growing recognition of fundamental and social rights over the last couple of decades.

To conceive an adequate societal vision we need, in the first place and most importantly, to be aware of people's fundamental needs - their needs in material terms and their needs in non-material terms.

As basic needs in material terms we consider, at present times, a safe environment with no or low levels of pollution, healthy food with little risks of poisoning, safe and healthy housing and transportation - but also economic-financial security at all ages, excellent and affordable health services at all ages, adequate comprehensive social and other personal support services for all, accessible and high quality educational and cultural offers for lifelong learning and enjoyment.

These are all prerequisites for basic aspirations which people have at all ages. These are in particular: learning - understanding - being active. As Hannah Arendt stated: "Learning and understanding start at birth and ends at death." And Goethe told us: "To be active is man's first priority." All this is definitely true also for people of advanced age as has already been said by Cicero in his charming dialogue "De Senectute" of Cato the Older - written by Cicero

at the astonishing age of 84 years. By the way, we may wonder what the average life expectancy of Romans was at that time.

Thus, excellent learning conditions, excellent working conditions, adequate remuneration for work performed on contract or in independent professions are very important for individuals in so-called working age. But also a high degree of recognition of other activities in the interest of society - be it in the family, in the community, in caring and supporting others, in advancing culture, in valuating moral standards or in doing all sorts of creative things not only for our sole personal pleasure - are indispensable and motivating for human beings to feel their usefulness in society. Through these contributions people can experience that they are really integrated in society, which, in turn, provides them with a sense of importance and well-being. And this all the more if and when society fully recognizes the interdependence between life stages - like learning, working, learning again, volunteering, etcetera - and permits and supports easy and self-determined transitions between these phases all over the life span.

Having a closer look at human needs in non-material terms we can state that such needs - at all ages - are in particular: love and emotional support, physical contact and care, safe living conditions and encouraging life perspectives, opportunities to exchange experiences, opinions, knowledge, personal recognition and respect, the possibility to meaningfully participate in society and to benefit from its advantages and support. Such aspects create and maintain the indispensable tissue of cohesion and solidarity without which there is no society or community at all which allows people to be social beings and see a sense in their existence - at all ages.

This leads us to the question of how older persons perceive themselves in society. Despite of all possible and often used assertions and allegations older persons generally do not want to be perceived and judged on grounds of their age. And, by the way, the same is largely true for young persons. They just want to be considered as "normal people" having the same value as all others. They do not want charity treatment but be recognized as rights holders. They detest to be segregated due to their age, to be discriminated against, to be marginalized in or excluded from society - not even mentioning neglect and abuse.

Older persons have essentially the same fundamental needs, concerns, dreams, hopes and fears as all others. Thus they have a deep desire for the same respect as all other members of society, the same need of recognition as all other persons of any age. They dearly want society to credit them the same value as others and they desire to concretely experience that society understands that human dignity does not diminish with age.

It is quite a banality to remember that "ageing" is a lifelong process which starts at birth and ends when we leave this world. So there is nothing like "Age" nor "The Aged". Older persons are members of all sorts of societal groups - as it is also the case with the young or those in their middle-ages. Consequently it is worthwhile reflecting whether "a society of all ages" is really what we should promote as an important goal.

We might wish to ask ourselves whether we should go for “a society of all sexes” or “a society of all colors” or “a society of all disabilities” or even “a society of all poverties”. Is it not true that by defining a society by such attributes we unconsciously and unintentionally may introduce a backdoor discriminatory element? Would it not be better to head for a society which equally recognizes, accommodates, respects and honors all people in their different life situations without highlighting specific personal attributes?

The statement that “it is not only important how old we get - but rather how we get old” invites us to reflect on how society allows us to grow older - over our full life span, under which material conditions, and in which non-material environment. Are these conditions enabling or disabling - at any age? Do they allow and support people to maintain, develop and enjoy all their potential - at all ages?

There is certainly broad consensus on many of the issues I have mentioned in my reflections. What is obviously still missing is the political determination to draw the necessary consequences, to agree on appropriate policies and to advance in their forceful implementation. It has also become evident that it is a very demanding challenge to conceive such a future proved and sustainable vision of an all-inclusive society. This cannot solely be done by governments only. This is the joint responsibility of all actors in a representative and participatory democracy.

Consequently and inevitably such a project - perhaps the most important one of our time - needs a spirit of close partnership as well as effective cooperation, based on mutual trust, between parliaments, governments and organized civil society. Let us, together, develop and carefully nurture such a political culture so that the vision of an all-inclusive society has a chance to become reality - for all people.

Thank you!