

UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing
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Speech by State Councillor Ruth LUTHI, Head of the Swiss Delegation

Madam Chairperson
Madam Secretary General
Ladies and Gentlemen

We would like to thank the German authorities and citizens for accepting to hold this conference of the “Region Europe” of the United Nations. This UNECE initiative presents governments and civil society with the opportunity to reflect further on the development of a common approach by the nations of Europe and North America to old age and ageing, as a process initiated in Madrid earlier this year. On behalf of the Swiss delegation, I would also like to express our appreciation of the very warm words of welcome offered yesterday. Now, as a fully-fledged member of the United Nations, we are delighted to be able to participate fully in the work of all its organs.

In Switzerland, the Madrid process has provided the public authorities and NGOs with the impetus to work together on ageing-related issues. The Berlin Conference should enable us to continue along this path. Admittedly, the Regional Strategy project still falls short of our expectations. Nevertheless, its merit lies in the fact that it provides a common reference point when the time comes to implement the objectives of the Madrid Action Plan at regional level.

Progression towards a “society of all ages” is a truly promising objective. It should provide inspiration in all areas of public policy. However, its implications are manifold. Allow me to briefly illustrate by mentioning a few.

Establishing a society of all ages forces us to reconsider specific policy objectives. For example, the aim of a health policy should not be merely to prolong life but to improve its quality too. This applies to the population as a whole, but particularly to older persons. Let me share with you this famous quote from a demographer: “Life must be added to the years, rather than years to life”.

Policies will inevitably have conflicting objectives. Everyone agrees on the need to increase the access of older person to the labour market. However, a solution has yet to be found which reconciles this objective with that of economic growth, based essentially on productivity gains. And an additional challenge arises regarding such an objective while millions of young people are still under- or unemployed.

Policies in this field are interlinked. It is impossible to lighten the heavy burdens placed on old age pension schemes without running the risk of increasing the burdens on other systems or shifting the burden on to other public authorities. Demographic ageing prevents us from confining ourselves to classic sector-based approaches: we must tackle this issue from a global perspective.

Finally, it should be remembered that certain measures may have a negative impact. They are sometimes deceptively simple, but are likely to reinforce social inequalities. This is why any rise of the legal retirement age, if considered, should not be introduced without the necessary adjustments and accompanying measures.

Let me move further. With these examples, we wanted to illustrate the complexity of answers on ageing-related issues. Living and operating in a federalist state, where regional and local communities play an essential role, we in Switzerland are acutely aware of this problem since it is necessary to harmonise policies at several levels of jurisdiction.

Ms. Chairperson, Ladies and gentlemen,

The countries we represent at this conference share common values: respect for human rights, the primacy of law, and democracy. In the years to come, our governments, in consultation with civil society, particularly with NGOs, will have to redefine their policies to implement complex measures, to explore new paths. Their adherence to the values they defend will be put to the test. Whether it be access to care, housing, employment or social integration, they will have to remember that measures on ageing-related developments apply to persons, and that these persons have rights. In our societies, older persons are of greater risk of being discriminated against than others, their contributions are not always well received, their skills are not highly regarded and their needs are not necessarily taken into account. Our governments must make a firm commitment to this segment of the population. We are delighted that this conference offers us the opportunity to renew this commitment.

A final word on cooperation with developing countries. These countries are beginning to feel the impact of their first demographic changes. These new situations which reflect the fact that people now live longer and the modest improvements in indicators, such as infant mortality reduction present them with great challenges. The social and economic cooperation and development policies of our countries, particularly those aiming at combating poverty, should better take account of these issues. We should encourage the search for solutions which avoid exclusion and promote internal, notably intergenerational solidarity. The International Action Plan of Madrid will serve as an invaluable guide as we navigate our way through these changes.

Ms. Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention.