

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

Statement

by

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**at the
UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing**

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Madam President,

On behalf of the Director-General of the International Labour Office, I would like to thank you and the organizers for inviting the ILO to such an important event. As you are aware, my Organization places the issue of Ageing high on its agenda and we look forward to the interesting discussions during the forthcoming days.

First, allow me to share some facts with you. The elderly population, aged 60 or over, is growing faster than all other age groups, with an estimated global increase from 205 million in 1950 to 1.96 billion in 2050. In other words, a nine-fold increase in the time span of just 100 years. The ageing of populations differs significantly between countries and regions. Populations in the UNECE countries are relatively old compared to the rest of the world and will continue to age. By 2050, 31% of the population in this region is projected to be 60 years of age or older. This figure currently stands at 18%.

This increase in life expectancy is one of the most positive, crucial and relevant demographic phenomena ever in both the history and the future of humankind. In the last 50 years, in the UNECE Region, life expectancy at birth of women has increased from 67 to 78 years and of men from 62 to 71 years. During the next 50 years, a further increase to 83 for women and 78 for men is foreseen. At the Second World Assembly on Ageing we

already celebrated this success. This event should serve to celebrate the success in our region and to take decisive and imaginative action in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres, as well as within communities and families from our region.

The ageing of populations has important socio-economic implications. Countries are expressing serious concerns about the viability of their pension systems; about their public sector budgets, and about the implications for health care systems and the possibility of a growing number of older people becoming socially excluded and marginalized. Social exclusion is one of the major problems that older people suffer in our countries. Furthermore, the problem of exclusion is more severe for women than for men, in rural areas than in the urban ones, and of course, in countries with fewer resources.

Madam President,

The ILO shares the view that full employment in decent conditions is a viable and productive way of meeting the ageing challenge in our countries. Many of the concerns raised over the financing of social security systems tend to be made from a static view of the development of the economy. They are based on the assumption that growth will not create enough jobs for everybody and that, consequently, there will be fewer and fewer people contributing to the social security system, and an increasing number seeking to benefit from its services, for a longer period of time.

I believe, however, that we should put greater emphasis on dynamic policies of economic growth and sustainable development, designed to provide a positive response, focusing on the creation of enterprises and decent work. The promotion of employment is not only an economic necessity for advancing sustainable economic growth, but is also the key to preserving the stability and enhancing the quality of social security schemes throughout the UNECE region.

Therefore we should not be thinking in terms of distributing the jobs currently available in a world of growing unemployment, but let us focus on creating more and better jobs. The promotion of full employment is the best way to ensure such welfare provision and to afford people the guarantee of a pension when the time comes to leave active employment

behind. We also believe that older people in our countries nowadays have good reasons for wanting to remain in active employment beyond the legal retirement age. Furthermore, older people represent an enormous potential and our countries need their support.

However, a prolongation of working life is not appropriate for everyone. First, there are people who spend their working lives in difficult working conditions or with long contribution periods. Second, there is the dilemma of intergenerational equity, thus the current generation may not enjoy the same rights as the generation of their fathers and mothers. Finally, there are those who have not had regular employment or whose activity does not give them the right to retirement.

Women are especially vulnerable. In all UNECE countries women live longer than men and they are expected to continue doing so. However, at older ages women are especially worse off as they tend to receive lower salaries, work part time with frequent interruptions or, in some countries, work in the informal economy. Furthermore, continuing discrimination against women in many countries, due to cultural and social practices, as well as legal systems, exacerbate their disadvantaged position in the labour market. Women are also more often engaged in non-remunerated activities, including the care for children and frail elderly people. All these factors contribute to the fact that women are less likely to receive contributory pensions and face higher risks of income insecurity and poverty in old age.

The extension of working life also demands some complementary measures such as those related to the updating of skills of older people in a lifelong learning framework, to the improvement of conditions of work, hygiene, health and safety, to new ways of work organization and to a new attitude among employers, colleagues and the older workers themselves.

In conclusion, Madam President,

This conference provides us with the opportunity to discuss new ways of providing suitable conditions and settings for older people willing to continue to give up their time, energy and experience. It may be possible to find gradual arrangements that combine

partial retirement with partial employment or with voluntary work to address the social problems of our countries.

What is most important is to allow older people to contribute to our economies and societies through paid or unpaid activities which keep them included.

At the onset of this third millennium we have the unique opportunity to bring together the different skills and experiences of an age diverse workforce so as to share the historical task to configure the world. It is about promoting the intergenerational solidarity that will ensure the progress of our economies in the long run.

As we already suggested at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, the ILO strongly believes that we must rid ourselves of the subjective stigma of the word "retired". This term associates the right to a pension with final exclusion from economic and social life and is thus not appropriate to reflect our perceptions of an ageing society. The Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan on Ageing clearly expresses our common commitment to aspire for an active and inclusive society for all ages.

The Ministerial Conference cannot let the opportunity to face this challenge with imagination and political will pass us by.

Thank you, Madam President.