

Ministerial Conference on Ageing
of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
in Berlin, 11 to 13 September 2002

Plenary Session on 12 September 2002 – General Debate
on behalf of
the accredited non-governmental organizations

Statement by Ans Willemse-van der Ploeg, Unie KBO Netherlands

Topic: Poverty and welfare - the right to a decent standard of living.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues and friends,

Since we started the preparation for the UN-conference on Ageing in Madrid I gathered a huge pile of paperwork and attended many meetings. Probably all of you did. It is time now we stop talking and start walking.

I will present you the opinions of the NGO-community about how to act in the field of poverty and welfare: what to do to develop a decent standard of living for older people.

The first recommendation of the NGO-forum on Ageing in Madrid reads:

"the governments have the responsibility for developing social protection systems to ensure the universal receipt of basic income by all older people".

Older persons are greatly contributing to their families and to society in voluntary work and in care for relatives and neighbours. Imagine that all older people would go on strike for a month. The world would be socially and economically disrupted.

But to make this contribution older persons needs a decent income in order to develop a healthier lifestyle.

Presently a decent standard of living for older people is a problem for countries in the whole UNECE-region.

In countries in transition many older people do not have a basic income nor have proper access to health care, medicines and housing. Value of pensions is shrinking by inflation and does not keep up with the growth of average income. Families still form the backbone of society in countries in transition. But, due to migration of young people an increasing number of older persons, especially older women in rural areas, find themselves living alone with neither family nor state support.

In richer countries older persons with basic income alone belong to the poorest of the society. A minority of pensioners has good private pensions. Governments wish to extend private pensions instead of improving state pensions. This policy affects negatively the position of those who cannot manage to obtain a sufficient private pension, mostly women and migrants. It is not true that older people are getting richer. That gap between rich and poor is deepening, also in this older generation.

We therefore welcome commitment 4 in which member states commits themselves to adjust social protection systems in response to demographic changes and their social and economic consequences.

We call on you, that you make such adjustments as guarantees a decent standard of living for older people. This requires the following measures.

Older people should be provided with a state pension, that guarantees this decent standard of living. They must not depend on meantesting benefits or free or reduced rate entitlements in order to obtain an adequate income. The meantesting system is messy, complex, expensive, unfair and fails to prevent poverty.

Governments should set regulations which increased the number of occupational pensions and private pensions. The increase of these pensions however can never be an argument to decrease the basic income. There will always be a number of people, especially older women and migrants, who depend on basic income alone.

You might react that such adjustments are unaffordable.

The variation in basis income among countries with the same level of Gross Domestic Product demonstrates that the level of state pensions does not depend on demographic or economic factors. No, it depends on political will!

It is also a matter of political will whether governments choose for incentives for private pensions or for promoting state pensions. The first option diverts money to the better-off at the expense of the poor.

We call upon you to choose a fairer strategy.

Since this situation in countries in the UNECE differs, we ask that in each country concrete criteria for a decent standard of living are defined.

This of course cannot be done without older people themselves. Measures, financially and otherwise, should be taken to guarantee involvement of older people and their organisations in the decisionmaking about these matters.

Last but not least: the UNECE and governments are co-responsible for positive image building. At this moment younger generations believe that older people are an economic burden and that they have opposite interests. As I stated before: an adequate pension benefits the whole society.

Guarantees for a decent standard of living effect all people: we all hope to grow old with dignity and with good quality of life.

Thank you.