

LEON:UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing
6.-8.11.2007

“A Society for All Ages:Challenges and Opportunities”

Panel:

Participation and social inclusion

*Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Ursula Lehr
Departement of Gerontology, University of Heidelberg*

We are living in **an aging world**. Never before so many persons could reach an advanced age in Europe, in the whole world. There is **an enormous extension of the lifespan** in all our countries. This is due to the progress of modern medicine, the improvement of the socio-economic living conditions, and it is also influenced by the life style (by preventive behavior: nutrition, physical and mental activities etc.). In most of the European countries a 60 years old person can expect 20 to 23 more years. That means: after retirement a person will live about 20-25 more years – one fourth of his /her life! Many of the persons of today are not prepared for such a long period in a post-occupational – and a postparental (!) – stage. The **percentage of people 65 years and older is growing rapidly**; but also this one of **people 80 years and older** .

One hundred years ago, the proportion of persons beyond and below 75 years of age in Germany was 1:79; 1925 the ratio was 1:67; 1936 it was 1:45, 1950 1:35, 1970 1:25, 1994 1:14.8 and in the year 2000 it is 1:12.8 and in 2040 it will be 1:6.2. (Lehr 2003)

These figures make clear, **that every effort for a healthy and competent aging is necessary**. Physical, mental, and social activities as well as healthy nutrition should be promoted strongly to **enable a life in old age, integrated into the society with participation and a high degree of inclusion**.

Most of the elderly people, also of the 80 plus, are competent and able to manage their daily life. In the age group of 60-80 years only 3-4 percent are dependent and need help. In the age group of 80 years and over these are 31 percent - indicating that nearly 70 percent of this group are competent to master their daily life (3. Altenbericht, 2001).

The aging of our populations brings challenges that can only be met by working together of all generations. The abilities, experiences, expert-knowledge and the special skills of the elderly are needed in our societies

In the **Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing**, adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in April 2002 you can read:

“The potential of older persons is a powerful basis for future development. This enables society to rely increasingly on the skills, experience and wisdom of older persons, not only to take the lead in their own betterment **but also to participate actively in that of society as a whole**” (statement of article 10)

and:

We commit ourselves to **eliminate all forms of discrimination, including age discrimination**. We also recognize that persons, as they age, should enjoy a life of fulfillment, health, security and **active participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of their societies**” – statement of article 5

and:

it is necessary “to **empower men and women to reach old age in better health**, and with more fully realized well-being; **to seek the full inclusion and participation of older persons in societies**; to enable older persons to contribute more effectively to their communities” (article 6)

But also 25 years ago, in August 1982, there was the World Assembly on Ageing at Vienna – and in the Vienna Plan of Action you can read (p.23, article 32).”...Policy makers and researchers, as well as the mass media and the general public, may need a radical change of perspective in order to appreciate that the problem of aging today is not just one of providing protection and care, **but of the involvement and participation of the elderly and the aging**. Eventually, the transition to a positive, active and developmentally oriented view of aging may well result from action by elderly people themselves, through the sheer force of their growing numbers and influence” – and “**Governments should facilitate the participation of older persons in the economic life of the society**” (p.41, article 37)

This was 25 years ago. And what happened in between?

In the Madrid Plan of Action (2002, article 12) there is following recommendation: “**Older persons should have the opportunity to work for as long as they wish and are able to, in satisfying and productive work, continuing to have access to education and training programmes. The empowerment of older persons and the promotion to their full participation are essential elements for active aging.**”

To-day, 2007, once again we have to underline in the Ministerial declaration, which we discuss here in Leon and which will be adapted on Thursday:

“**Active citizenship, a dynamic civil society and interaction between citizens and government are vital in order to achieve a society for all ages as this promotes social cohesion, helps overcome age discrimination, and empowers older and younger persons (to act for themselves and) to work together.** We confirm that **lifelong learning and active aging, access to modern information and communication technologies, volunteerism and civic engagement are crucial means to promote participation.**” (§9)

The **increasingly important role of elderly** people should not be seen only as **potential voters** for the next election. Their **experience, authority and social responsibility are needed in politics**. Although the number of active elderly people showed a **light increase during the last years**, the effectiveness and **participation of older people in social and political life is not fully realized**. There remains much to be done. Older people need and want more opportunities to be involved into the political arena; they want to be part of social development.

The majority of senior citizens must be in a position **to take part responsibly and independently in social, cultural and political life** and to be able to make a valuable contribution to society. Senior citizens do not merely want to join in the

discussions and decisions elaborating, **they also want to share in the responsibility. Participation is far more than just voting in the elections. It is an ongoing process which must be developed by suitable formal structures (advisory bodies, consultation processes ect.).**

We want to live in a world, where the governments and parliaments of all states and the leaderships of all the political parties **look intensified after the needs of the elderly people**, listen for what they have to say and facilitate their cooperation in resolving their matters of concern. **That means also, that senior citizens themselves are called upon for their political engagement** because of the fact, that all decisions upon their destiny in then future are made in political committees.

But **senior citizens policies should not be restricted to senior citizens specific subjects**. The richness in experience of life and knowledge in many fields is too precious as not to be used in the public interests after having reached a particular age of life. **Therefore the possibilities of active cooperation of aged people shall be improved in all social fields.**

Political participation in old age

How powerful is the older generation in our society? This is not an easy question to answer. Some possible conclusions can be drawn from the age groups represented in various sectors of public life.

Older parliamentarians tend to be under-represented in parliaments at state and federal level in Germany. Baltes (2001), for instance, points in a leading article in the ZEIT to a “dramatic under-representation of the older generation” in the Federal Parliament and in the Berlin state parliament. Here he states: “In the Federal Parliament only 1.6 percent of 666 members were older than 65 at the time elections took place. 0,4 percent were over 70. That is just one person!

In the new legislation-period (since 2005) from now 613 members of the parliament 4 persons (2 men, 2 women) were 70 years and older (0.6%) – and 3.9% were 65 and older (a slight increase from 1,6% to 3,9%) –

Baltes finds this low representation of older people surprising – not only because of the high proportion of older persons in Germany, but also because the participation of older people in other countries is much higher. He cites here a far higher proportion of seniors in the parliaments of the USA and Great Britain. This of course does not necessarily signify that these countries have a stronger ageing orientation.

In the 16 states parliaments the percentage of the over 60 year olds(!) varies from approximately 3% in Thüringen to 22% in Niedersachsen

Thüringen	3 %
Saarland	4 %
Bayern	6 %
Sachsen-Anhalt	8 %
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	11 %
Baden-Württemberg	12 %

NRW	12 %
Berlin	13 %
Rheinland-Pfalz	15 %
Brandenburg	16 %
Hamburg	16 %
Hessen	16 %
Sachsen	18 %
Niedersachsen	22 %

The figures do tend to confirm Baltes' findings (see above) and indicate a clear hiatus in the political participation spectrum of state parliaments, where **those over 65 and those under 25 are strikingly under-represented.**

We need more elderly members in the parliament, - not only in regard for a policy for the aged. **We need the experience, the special skills and the wisdom of the elderly in all the political domains from the Foreign Policy, Economy and Finances, to Cultural, Education and Research Policy and the policy for developing countries**

In Germany we now have nearly **1200 seniors' representatives (Seniorenvertretungen, Seniorenräte)** in cities and communities, which mostly are working very effective for the concerns of elderly people.

Social participation of the aged in voluntary work:

Ten years ago we stated: In the age group 65 and over only 3.3% are in the labor market, but 12,4% are engaged in official voluntary work, 13.2% are caring for an aged person and 19.5% are caring for children (mostly grandchildren) (KOHLI & KÜNEMUND, 1997).

Now in the age-group 55-64 there are 40% engaged in voluntary work and additionally 30% were ready to engagement, if they would find the right job. In the age group 65-74 these are 32% (+20% , which are ready) and in the age group 75 plus there are 19% active and 10% ready (5. Altenbericht der Bundesregierung; Berlin 2006,p. 211).

In **longitudinal studies** you can see, that **social participation develop over the life course.** There is a positive correlation between activities and social participation in former life during youth and young and middle adulthood and social participation in later life, but the type of volunteer work in young adulthood (e.g. in sport clubs) is different from that in old age (e.g. helping an old and ill neighbour).

Empowerment in old age is the challenge. How to empower the aged? What can be done for a better participation of the elderly?

We have a **programme for senior-trainers**, which seems to be very successful. The older generation will have increasingly an important role. The potential of the elderly must be made useful for society. The model programme "Experience for Initiatives" (EFI) is an important step in this direction. "Around 1000 elderly people have taken part in these courses to be senior trainers in order to learn something

new and to use their experience in many local projects for the benefit of all age and population groups locally" (Ursula v.d.Leyen)

Participation in everyday life

Right, **on the one hand we have to enable the elderly**, we have to do everything for a healthy and competent aging! Physical activity, mental activity and social activity as well as healthy nutrition are necessary for a healthy aging.

But aging is a life long process. Healthy aging starts in early childhood and adolescence in regard to optimize the development; a health oriented lifestyle (healthy nutrition, physical activity, social activity, development of interests and hobbies) and the development of successful coping strategies is necessary. Participation in old age starts in young adulthood (STAUDINGER 2002).

Elderly of to-day are **more active in sports and physical activity** than senior citizens of yesterday.. To-day 28% of the male members and 11,4% of the female members of sport clubs are 60 years and over; but much more are active in sports and gymnastics without a membership in a club

Mental activity is needed, too and is a prerequisite of social participation.

In adult education classes (Volkshochschule) 21,7 % of the students are 50-65 years of age, 11,4% are 65 and over. More and more elderly are taking courses in the universities and are very successful. Most there is a very closed relationship between the younger and the elderly students.

We have to make a **life-long learning** possible; we have to teach the elderly of to-day (not only these of to-morrow) **how to manage computer, e-mail and internet**. Here we have some special programmes in Germany and we can state, that the **number of Internet-user is increasing**. During the last 3 years we have had an increase of the onliner group of 60 + of 33%. Now 24% of the elderly women and 47% of the elderly men are user of the internet.

If you look at the **statistics of travelling agencies**, we can notice that the elderly are included very well. The 60+ generation is much more travelling than the younger ones. Seniors usually are travelling for a longer period of time than the younger generation and the tourism branch has to learn to adapt to the special wishes and needs of the elderly.

We have to enable the society to the demographic change! Not only the individual is demanded, the society too! First it seems necessary, **to change their attitude toward the aged**, to see aging as chances and to use these chances! In this way, **empowerment in old age is a challenge for the mass media, for television**, too. We need much more popular movies, success stories as the German TV movie "Der große Bellheim", in which the experienced seventy years old is more successful in solving problems than younger ones.

But we also have to change something in the environment. Here the city, the states are demanded, which have to realize the aging world. We need a better

traffic system, so that elderly will have a greater mobility. Many of our cities are not very comfortable for our elderly. Town-planning and traffic service have to take into account the high percentage of elderly persons. - Are there enough possibilities for physical activities of the elderly like public gardens (with seating accommodations) or places where they can go in for sports, gymnastics, indoor-swimming-pools, etc.. The construction of travel busses leaves a lot to be desired and needs adjusting to the needs of the older person. High steps are a handicap, narrow steps in a double decker are for many impossible to climb (toilettes should be available in any case).

Our architects and designers need to adjust to an aging world. This is important for private living environment as well as public buildings and hotels. Railings on both sides of stairs would be optimal. Why are the seats and chairs often so low and without arm rests, which is a problem when older people get up. Why are bathtubs not automatically equipped with a grip and why are toilet seats not at the optimal seating heights? Some hotels have night lights with such weak lights that reading is impossible? Why is the TV set so low that seniors are unable to hear at all? To avoid disturbances for other guests, ok, but then the hotel should provide ear phones. And how do you find the way to the bathroom at night?

Industry and factory have to realize the aging society and change some of their products. How many older people are able and competent to drive a car (also such, which have their difficulties in walking!) but very often the construction of many cars is not the best for them and makes difficulties by getting in and out! And very often you can find so much electronic, which never will be needed but is confusing the elderly! And in the future the gas-station has to offer more help! –The same is true in the **supermarket**: more help will be needed. – and also portions for One-person-households!

A policy for senior citizens:

Priorities of the Federal Government's policy regarding senior citizens are:

- to adapt social protection systems in a sustainable way in response to population ageing
- to increase the rate of employment of older employees
- to promote a positive image of ageing and old age in public
- to enhance independent living and active participation of older persons in all social processes, also in voluntary work and active citizenship
- to support senior citizens' organisations
- to promote solidarity and responsibility between generations
- to maintain and develop educational opportunities for older persons
- to pass legislation regarding protection and assistance in old age
- to ensure high quality care and assistance in old age
- to analyse the consequences of the demographic change, in particular with regard to a better use of the potential of older persons

- to promote the idea of older persons as consumers
- to promote the economic factor of ageing
- to take into account the special needs of older migrants
- to take into account the special needs of older persons with disabilities
- to support European and international co-operation
- to develop differentiated policies for older persons according to the different needs and experience of men and women
- to respect the gender mainstreaming approach in all projects

By providing different framework conditions the government enables older people to live their third phase of life in independence, dignity and contentment at all stages – active age, restricted lifestyle because of health problems, very old age. Promoting voluntary work and active citizenship, providing social protection systems in case of sickness or need of nursing care or setting up standardized training programmes for geriatric nurses at national level are just some examples. The National Action Plan describes the Federal Government's projects and actions in relation to the ten commitments.

The Federal Government's Reports on Ageing

The Federal Government's reports on ageing which are issued in each term of office provide information on the life situation of older persons in Germany. At the same time these academic expert opinions contain concrete proposals of how to make better use of the enormous potential of older people in economy, working life and society. The reports are drafted by special committees made up of experts from different fields chosen according to the topic of the report.

The 5th report on ageing – „Potentials of ageing“

The 5th report on ageing published in 2005 focuses on the topics of strengths and practical knowledge of the older generation. It impressively proves that older persons have a considerable wealth of knowledge and experience in working life, a higher level of education and qualification than younger generations and dispose of a good income.

It also shows that many senior citizens in Germany not only want to support their family and their direct private environment but that they also are prepared to get involved in voluntary work for society. In a series of conferences on the topics of „Gainful employment of older persons“ and „Economic potential of older persons“ as well as workshops on „Products and Services“, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth disseminated the results of the 5th report on ageing and made them known to multipliers in politics, business and associations.

The 6th Report on Ageing – „Images of ageing in society“

It is only possible to meet the demographic challenges and develop the necessary solutions with a new view of ageing. The upcoming 6th report on ageing of the

Federal Government on the topic of “ images of ageing in society “ will develop modern, realistic scenarios of ageing and make recommendations on how these images can be fixed firmly in society.

Generally we have to state: Today a policy for the elderly has to be more than just a policy for pensions systems and a policy for care and has to include also other aspects than financial ones. In order to cope with the challenges of a graying world the following issues should be stressed.

The first issue is maintaining and increasing the competence of the elderly in order to prevent dependency, to secure a healthy aging with a high degree of quality of life. A policy for the aged is a policy for healthy aging, combined with a state of psycho-physical wellbeing. We know, aging is affected by biological heredity as well as by individual behavior and a wide range of social, environmental, cultural and political factors. Healthy aging is the result of a life long process. So it is necessary to optimize the development of the individual. We know that a variety of influences in early childhood, adolescence, during early and middle adulthood, but also the present life situation of the aged is determining the process of aging and well-being in old age.

A policy should promote the understanding between the generations, which requires the participation of all generations, partly by integrating senior citizens in politics and political decision-making

Concluding remarks

The demographic change, the aging Europe and the aging world, is a challenge for all of us. A policy for the aged, however, should not be determined only by the question: „**What can we do for the aged?** “; it also should be asked: „**What can the aged do for the society?** “. For this we need to revise the negative image of the aged, which can be found in some countries. Most of the elderly are competent and wish to engage themselves for other people, for the society. Societies, communities, churches, clubs etc. should promote this readiness for voluntary public engagement and be prepared to provide the framework and to utilize the potential and services elderly people have to offer.

Integration and participation of the elderly are a prerequisite for the quality of life of the elderly, for health and productivity; – but it is helpful also for the society. In 1985 Robert BUTLER stated: “**The participation of older people enriches societies, economically, culturally and spritually.**” Health and productivity are closely connected. The loss of one may entail the loss of the other and so lead on dependency, decline of mental, psychological and physical abilities and incompetence – **whereas productivity, participation, responsibility and the feeling of being needed have a favourable effect on health.** And BUTLER stated: “Much discussion of health... is really a discussion of medicine. The medical model is a very constricted one”; but we have to “recognice that health and productivity are interacting conditions. The unproductive human is at higher risk of illness and economic dependency; and the sick person is limited in productivity and is, therefore, at higher risk of dependency” (p.12).

Old age, longevity, should not be seen as a problem but as a chance and challenge - a challenge for everyone: for the aging individual, for his family, and for our society. We should not ask only for the problems and deficits of aging and old age. Aging from birth to dying and death is development. And we have to ask for -and we have to open our eyes for, and we have to initiate research on, - the new potentials of the aged, also for the competences and new potentials of the very old persons.