

Statement of Ruth Brand, Board Member of BAGSO (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen – German National Association of Senior Citizens Associations), León, 07.11.07

Opportunities for Active Ageing

Thank you, Chair and thanks to UNECE for inviting NGOs to present their contributions at this Conference.

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Let me start with a brief introduction as to what the German National Organization of Senior Citizens Organizations stands for and does.

BAGSO, as we call it for short, is a national umbrella organization of 97 senior citizens' organisations in Germany dealing with all aspects of ageing. Our Board consisting of volunteers, the national office and specialised committees coordinate matters of common interest and actively promote them in the political arena. Thus BAGSO can give advice and recommendations at all levels of welfare work and social affairs concerning the elderly.

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The main goals and tasks of BAGSO are:

- to foster independence in old age
- to assume political and social responsibility
- to support intergenerational solidarity
- to improve the image and position of senior citizens in society
- to promote learning about and in old age
- to promote the interests of senior consumers

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In addition, BAGSO is organising regularly the German Senior Citizens Days. The last one took place in Cologne in 2006 with more than 15.000 visitors. The next one will be in Leipzig in June 2009.

Turning now to opportunities for active ageing: Did you know that from a biological point of view human ageing is supposed to begin at the age of 30? In the 5 minutes allotted to me I shall, however, not try to cover all aspects of active ageing beginning with age 30! I shall rather limit myself to a few remarks about what we might also call healthy ageing. But let me first add yet another definition of active ageing to the ones we have already heard which I take from the very interesting contribution made by Prof. Alan Walker of Sheffield University at our Berlin Conference in April of this year under the auspices of the German Presidency in the EU:

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“Active ageing should be a comprehensive strategy to maximise participation and wellbeing as people age. It should operate simultaneously at the individual (lifestyle), organizational (management) and societal (policy) levels and at all stages of the life course.”

I think someone should take the trouble some day and unify the various definitions.

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There are two important aspects to the concept implied by this definition:

1. A life course approach (something that has been mentioned by several speakers before in this Conference) and
2. Inclusion of all relevant actors and structures

To illustrate this I will give you an example: The rising concern in most industrialized countries about the increasing number of children and young people that are overweight, and the earlier and more frequent incidence of diabetes help to increase awareness about the importance of health promotion and disease prevention. Health promotion activities shall not only be used selectively in order to bring relief or recovery in case of injuries like falls which often result in broken hips with the elderly and ensuing weakening of the whole constitution or other diseases, healthy ageing is a question of a healthy lifestyle right from the start. This also means that attention has to be directed towards the food industry, the way the family, schools and the work place prepare and organize meals, the way physical exercise and more sedentary activities are balanced out etc.

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On the other hand, looking at it from the further end of the life cycle – as I am doing now – it is never too late to stop smoking, change one’s diet or start physical exercise in a regular manner even though the benefit may not equal that gained by an early start in life. Group activities, especially self-help groups and other social networks or just informal company of like-minded persons are of particular importance in bridging the gap between good intentions and action.

Just to illustrate the extent to which the concept of activation has already taken hold: In my youth the doctor, as a rule, ordered the patient to stay in bed until completely cured no matter what the illness was. Nowadays they practically chase you out of bed at any age after hardly a day or two in hospital.

In conclusion I would like to just mention a few examples which I believe need more attention when discussing prevention in an ageing society:

We will have to work longer in order to compensate for the longer period of time people will receive their pension. So far only few companies are prepared to adjust their working conditions accordingly.

The number of very old persons will increase and there will be more and more people aged 80 and over. So far there are only few qualified and adequate programs available for this group. This applies in particular to rehabilitation services after an older person has been confined to bed for a longer period of time. Which goes to show that there is a strong link between prevention and rehabilitation. This is also true with regard to medicine prescriptions: improved monitoring is needed in order to avoid adverse effects from different drugs on account of multi-morbidity.

A longer life also means a higher risk of depression and dementia. Programs to activate older persons suffering from dementia all too often remain limited to standard occupational therapy of some kind or other.

I believe, however, that the most important aspect of active ageing is to maintain autonomy and participation in society as long as possible. This not only means profiting as much as possible from advances in technology. It also means empowerment, to have a say in decisions concerning the elderly on all levels and in all fields of action. It is not only older persons themselves who will benefit from this as they will maintain a good quality of life up to a very old age. Their immediate environment and society as a whole will also benefit because of the constructive contributions of older persons and the reduction of the financial burden on social protection systems. In this context we very much appreciate the fact that the German government intends to introduce a prevention law that could constitute a solid basis for some of the requirements I have mentioned.

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Thank you for your attention!