

Meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking

**DESIGNING A STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND
PARTICIPATION PROCESS**

Guidance note

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ABOUT THIS GUIDANCE NOTE

This guidance note was drafted by Jemma Stovell, HelpAge International, in collaboration with Lisa Warth, UNECE Population Unit. It was informed by the presentations and deliberations during an online workshop on “Making participation meaningful: bringing governments and civil society together” (April 2021), organised as part of the MIPAA+20 Webinar Series by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the German National Association of Senior Citizens’ Organizations (BAGSO), AGE Platform Europe, the NGO Committee on Ageing Geneva, and the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

The national and local examples of participatory approaches in UNECE member States were provided, unless otherwise indicated, by National Focal Points on Ageing in the Country Notes on Mainstreaming Ageing, available on <https://unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing>.

This guidance note on meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking was prepared to support policymakers and civil society actors in developing inclusive stakeholder engagement and participation processes. It complements the UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing.

GLOSSARY

Citizen	This guidance note uses the term ‘citizen’ but the exclusionary nature of the term should be recognized. All older persons living within a State should be able to participate in policymaking including refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, etc.
Civil society	Civil society as defined in this guidance note is broad and includes a range of stakeholders, including but not limited to: <ul data-bbox="606 571 1212 985" style="list-style-type: none">• Research groups and academia• Think tanks• Community groups or organizations• Older people’s organizations or associations• Non-governmental organizations• International non-governmental organizations• Women’s organizations• Faith-based organizations• Social partners• Social movements• Advocacy groups
Older people’s groups	The term ‘older people’s groups’ is used to describe older people’s organizations, associations, platforms and councils of older people. In different contexts, different names are used to describe groups of older people who come together as a collective.
Participatory policymaking	Participatory policymaking is defined in this guidance note to include individuals or groups in all stages of the policy cycle via consultative or participatory means to achieve accountability, transparency, and active citizenship. ¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Older persons have a right to participate in decision-making processes and must be able to participate in policymaking in a meaningful way. They are, however, often excluded from mainstream policy development processes and face barriers to participation. Many older persons confront intersecting challenges related to poverty, social isolation, abuse, as well as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, based on their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, religion, or limited ability or disability amongst other factors. This undermines the enjoyment of their fundamental rights and limits their opportunities for healthy and active ageing and contributing to society.²

This guidance note was developed to support and encourage policymakers to develop meaningful participatory approaches that involve older persons and civil society in all stages of policymaking. It may also be of interest to other stakeholders at the international, national, and subnational levels, including civil society organizations.

The note outlines key aspects of participatory policymaking and gives an overview of the barriers older persons face in policy processes including how gender roles can unequally shape opportunities for participation and experiences in policymaking. Part 4 presents enabling factors that can support meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking and suggested key steps in designing a stakeholder engagement process.

The guidance note draws on a variety of sources including literature focused on participatory policymaking and participatory tools that can encourage meaningful engagement. It also draws on the UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing, country reports from previous review and appraisal cycles of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 (MIPAA), country notes on mainstreaming ageing and discussion points raised in the UNECE online workshop on “Making participation meaningful: bringing governments and civil society together”.³ Practical examples from

countries in the UNECE region are used throughout the guidance note.

2. MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN POLICYMAKING

2.1 Participatory policymaking

Participatory policymaking is an approach to facilitate the inclusion of individuals or groups in the problem definition, formulation, choice of preferred policy solutions, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies through consultative and participatory means to achieve accountability, transparency, and active citizenship. It operates under the premise that citizens and other stakeholders take an active role in policy processes throughout all stages of the policy cycle.⁴

There are different motives for, and benefits of, using participatory approaches in policymaking. At the instrumental level, involving a variety of stakeholders can create greater support and buy-in for policy decisions, which can make a policy more effective and legitimate.⁵ Hearing from different voices can allow governments to tap into a wider range of sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions and can improve the quality of decisions reached. It can build trust between people and governments.⁶ Participation in policymaking also has intrinsic value as it can boost self-confidence and instil a sense that one’s views are being heard and considered.

It is important to ensure that everyone can realize their full potential and rights and that all segments of society have a voice. Policymakers should consider the needs and potential of different age groups and respond to the diversity among older persons. Including older persons and civil society’s perspectives in all stages of policymaking can improve the chances of success of policies, improve ownership of the outputs and thus sustainability, and ensure that challenges are addressed quickly and effectively.⁷

Even though there are many accepted benefits associated with participatory policymaking, there is also evidence regarding the continued exclusion of significant parts of the population, including persons living in poverty, persons living with disabilities, women, youth, and older persons.⁸

To foster active participation in society and development, MIPAA, adopted in 2002, set the objective of achieving participation of older persons in decision-making processes at all levels. Recommended actions outlined in MIPAA include taking into account the needs and concerns of older persons in decision-making at all levels; encouraging, when they do not already exist, the establishment of organizations of older persons at all levels to, inter alia, represent older persons in decision-making; and taking measures to enable the full and equal participation of older persons, in particular older women, in decision-making at all levels.⁹

United Nations Guidelines for the periodic review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing issued in 2006 recommended applying a ‘bottom-up participatory approach’ to ensure that older persons have an opportunity to express their views on policies affecting their lives.¹⁰ The UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing also strongly emphasize the importance of a participatory approach to policymaking, recommending policymakers to involve older persons and civil society in strategic efforts to mainstream ageing across policies at all levels, from the local to the global. However, in practice, meaningful participation and inclusion of older persons is not always realized in policymaking processes.

2.2 Meaningful participation

Meaningful participation in policymaking requires considering both who is invited and enabled to participate, and how participatory processes are designed. Establishing structures towards participation or using participatory tools to support policymaking does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation. It is

important to consider who should be involved, what tools or processes are used to facilitate participation, the power dynamics that can facilitate or hinder participation, how information is shared, and which channels are used for engagement and information sharing. Understanding and addressing barriers to participation is also crucial.

For participation to be meaningful it should be a part of a longer-term process and not a one-off exercise. Participation will often only take place at the beginning stages of the policy cycle through stakeholder consultations. Meaningful participation however involves stakeholders in all stages of the policy cycle. This includes research, data collection, priority setting, policy formulation, budgeting, implementation, and review and evaluation.

Meaningful participation is also characterised by the type of stakeholder involvement, the degree to which their involvement is invited and enabled and the ways in which they can contribute to decision-making. Information that is provided one-way from decision-makers to stakeholders is less meaningful than a two-way flow of information between decision-makers and stakeholders (consultation). Joint decision-making and transferring control over decision-making and resources to stakeholders are more empowering forms of participation along a ‘continuum of participation’ outlined in Box 1. Approaches that are further along the continuum engage stakeholders in a more meaningful way.

Box 1: Continuum of participation

- **Contribution:** voluntary or other forms of input to predetermined programmes and projects.
- **Information sharing:** stakeholders are informed about their rights, responsibilities, and options.
- **Consultation:** stakeholders are given the opportunity to interact and provide feedback and may express suggestions and concerns. However, analysis and decisions are usually made by outsiders, and stakeholders have no assurance that their input will be used.
- **Cooperation and consensus building:** stakeholders negotiate positions and help determine priorities, but the process is directed by outsiders.
- **Decision-making:** stakeholders have a role in making decisions on policy, project design and implementation.
- **Partnership:** stakeholders work together as equals towards mutual goals.
- **Empowerment:** transfer of control over decision-making and resources to stakeholders

Source: Karl, M. (2002)¹¹

2.3 Participatory tools and approaches

Tools commonly used in participatory policymaking include information sharing tools, consultation tools and active participation tools.¹² Each of these tools requires interaction between governments and citizens and vary in the level of influence people have and in their views being heard. Governments may disseminate information about a policy or citizens may access information, but in both cases the flow of information is often one-

directional. Consultation tools facilitate a two-way process; however, they are quite low on the participation continuum. Active participation tools are associated with being at the higher end of the participation continuum and represent a two-way relationship. Box 2 below presents the different participatory tools, the relationship between citizens/civil society and governments, and where they lie on the participation continuum. When designing participatory interventions, these factors should be considered.

Box 2: Examples of participatory approaches and tools

Tool	Example	Relationship	Participation continuum
Information-sharing tools	<i>Draft policy documents or progress reports on existing policies, website, radio, social media Government communication</i>	One-way relationship	Lower end of the participation continuum
Consultation tools	<i>Discussion forums, roundtables, public hearings, town meeting, focus groups, surveys, interviews, opinion polls, comment periods on draft policy, citizen panels, advisory committees, interest group representatives</i>	Limited two-way relationship	
Active participation tools	<i>Consensus conferences, citizen juries, tripartite commissions, working groups, citizen forums and dialogue processes</i>	Advanced two-way relationship (Partnership)	Higher end of the participation continuum

Source: Adapted from Civicus (2020), OECD (2001) and Karl (2002).¹³

3. OLDER PERSONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLICYMAKING

3.1 Older persons in policymaking

Older persons are often not consulted nor given the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the development of services, policies and programmes built for them and are frequently excluded from mainstream policy processes.¹⁴ Promoting participatory policymaking means that older persons should have the opportunity and ability to meaningfully participate in public decisions that affect their lives and communities, hold decision-makers to account and provide feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of actions by various decision-makers.

Older persons' participation in policymaking can take place both in individual and collective settings.¹⁵ An example of collective settings are older people's groups that are set up at the grassroots level either by older persons

themselves, or by non-governmental or community organizations. In other cases, older people's councils or senior councils are set up by governments as advisory and consultative bodies that support policymaking. Organizations of older people provide an important means for participation by advocating for improved policies and provide opportunities to influence decision-making at all levels.¹⁶ They can also provide a space for older persons who may otherwise struggle to have their voices heard. The key to ensuring meaningful participation is to identify and understand discriminatory barriers that may be present and that affect opportunities to contribute. These could include gender inequality as well as intersecting discriminatory inequalities related to poverty, social isolation, age, abuse, ethnic background, sexual orientation, social standing, religion, and disability status. These as well as other factors can undermine their fundamental rights and abilities to participate.¹⁷ It is noted that gender discrimination, especially, impacts men and women differently often leading to significant inequality for older women (see Box 3).¹⁸

Box 3: How gender and age intersect

- Gender roles can change with age. Older persons often fulfil roles that are not typical of their gender, such as older men caring for their grandchildren, and older women heading households.
- Gender-based discrimination, particularly in later life, can be hidden by a lack of sex and age-disaggregated data. This is a major constraint to developing gender-responsive policies and programmes.
- Gender-based discrimination can accumulate over a person's lifetime and be exacerbated in older age.
- Older women can face double discrimination based on both their age and gender.
- Older men can experience challenges to masculinity that can leave them feeling isolated.
- Older women and men and older persons of other genders are at risk of gender-based violence. It is about abuse of power.
- Understanding changing gender identities and power relations throughout life is crucial to understanding the experience of ageing.

Source: Gender equality training toolkit, HelpAge International 2020.

Against this backdrop, policy agendas on active ageing have sought to encourage the social and political participation of older persons. But more needs to be done to ensure participation in policymaking is inclusive and meaningful at all levels.

3.2 Civil society in policymaking

Civil society is a prominent actor who can help shape policies by articulating the needs and demands of the people they work with. Civil society organizations can help public institutions

become more transparent, accountable, and inclusive in their decision-making processes, projects, and policies.¹⁹

Civil society organizations can be an important ally for governments when it comes to engaging older persons in policymaking. Organizations who are well-informed about the needs and interests of older persons can share information with decision-makers and can create spaces for the voices older persons to be heard, for example by coordinating consultations or focus groups with older persons, while academic institutions and research bodies can provide valuable research on ageing and older persons.

Civil society organizations also play a role in building the skills of older persons to engage in advocacy with governments. This creates space for them to tell their own stories from their perspectives to inform policymaking. If a government is not engaging stakeholders, it may be that NGOs or older people's groups claim space to participate.

3.3 Levels of participation – local, national, international

At the local and national level, older persons may be involved directly in policymaking through older people's associations and councils or consultations of individual older persons. Community organizations, non-governmental organizations and other civil society stakeholders can also act as channels for the participation of older persons and represent their interests.

At the international level, civil society also plays an important role in advocating for the interests of older persons in global processes (Box 4). This may be via formalised groups such as the Stakeholder Group on Ageing (Box 5) which is a recognized member of the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders structure, which has formal status with the United Nations. In other cases, civil society may coordinate around a particular policy process to strengthen the voice of older people without holding a formal status. In all cases, civil society is a critical partner for government and the United Nations system when it comes to supporting older people to participate in global processes.

Box 4: Examples of international and regional networks on ageing

- Age Platform Europe
- Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP)
- HelpAge International
- International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG)
- International Federation on Ageing (IFA)
- International Longevity Centre Global Alliance (ILC Global Alliance)
- International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA)
- International Social Security Association (ISSA)
- NGO Committees on Ageing in New York, Geneva and Vienna
- Stakeholder Group on Ageing (SGA)
- Stakeholder Group on Ageing Africa (SGAA)

Governments can also support direct participation in global policy processes. For example, there have been cases of governments including young people or people with disabilities in government delegations at high

level events such as the High-Level Political Forum. While this has not been the case for older persons to date, it remains an important option for enhancing the participation of older persons at the global level.

Box 5: Participation at the global level – the Stakeholder Group on Ageing

The Stakeholder Group on Ageing (SGA) was established in response to the lack of attention to older persons in the Millennium Development Goals and the subsequent lack of attention in the early days of the post-2015 negotiations that led to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While individual NGOs struggled to be heard within the intense negotiations, when they came together as the SGA, they were able to have a greater impact and take a seat alongside the Major Groups (established at the Rio Summit in 1992 to represent 8 constituency groups that did not include older persons). Initially formed as an informal coalition campaigning for the inclusion of older persons, the SGA has now been formalised and accepted as a member of the expanded Major Groups and Other Stakeholders mechanism which is the main interface between civil society and the United Nations system on sustainable development issues. It now performs a critical role via its members, sharing information about Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) processes and facilitating the participation of older persons and local and national civil society organizations in the High-Level Political Forum and related processes.

For more information see: <https://www.stakeholdergrouponageing.org/>

3.4 Barriers to the participation of older persons in policymaking

There are numerous barriers to the participation of older persons in decision-making processes and policy development. They include social isolation, digital exclusion and gender roles, ageism, culture, beliefs, habits, and the lack of concrete opportunities to participate.²⁰ Other barriers include a lack of political will, or lacking financial or human resources or instruments for implementing participatory approaches.

Ageism

Ageism, (the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination directed towards people based on their age²¹) hinders participation in policymaking at all levels. Older persons tend to be stereotyped as a homogenous group characterised by passivity, reduced mental and physical faculties and dependency.²² Ageist attitudes can influence consultations, including how questions are asked and what responses are encouraged.²³ Self-directed ageism on the other hand can impact the desire to engage in social and political life, including in policymaking processes.

Gender inequalities

Women across the UNECE region have a longer life expectancy than men and dominate in

numbers among the older age group. However, this doesn't mean that they have greater representation or roles in policymaking. Structural gender inequalities can impact access to positions of power and participation in policymaking processes including their participation in workshops, focus groups, digital space, and leadership roles within older people's groups.²⁴ As a result, these intersecting inequalities can act as a barrier to older women's participation.

The issues mentioned above should be considered at the beginning stages of the policy cycle. Appropriate approaches and tools should be identified to ensure that older persons from diverse backgrounds can be reached and included.

Lack of legal instruments facilitating the participation of older persons

Legislation or regulations mandating participatory approaches to policymaking and established mechanisms such as older people's councils at national and local levels can facilitate the participation of older persons and civil society in policymaking. In their absence, and without a participatory governance culture and practice, meaningful participation is more difficult to achieve.

A question often raised by civil society and some governments that contribute to the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing for the Purpose of Strengthening the Protection of Human Rights of Older Persons is the potential establishment of a mechanism that protects and promotes the rights of older persons in the form of an international convention on the rights of older persons. An international mechanism could include the right to participate in policymaking processes as part of participation in public and political life and would provide a guide to governments on how to make their policymaking processes inclusive of older persons and in line with human rights standards. Participation in the implementation, monitoring and reporting mechanisms established by a convention, including at the national level, would provide a way for older persons to hold their governments to account and the recommendations from these mechanisms would feed into policymaking and reform processes.

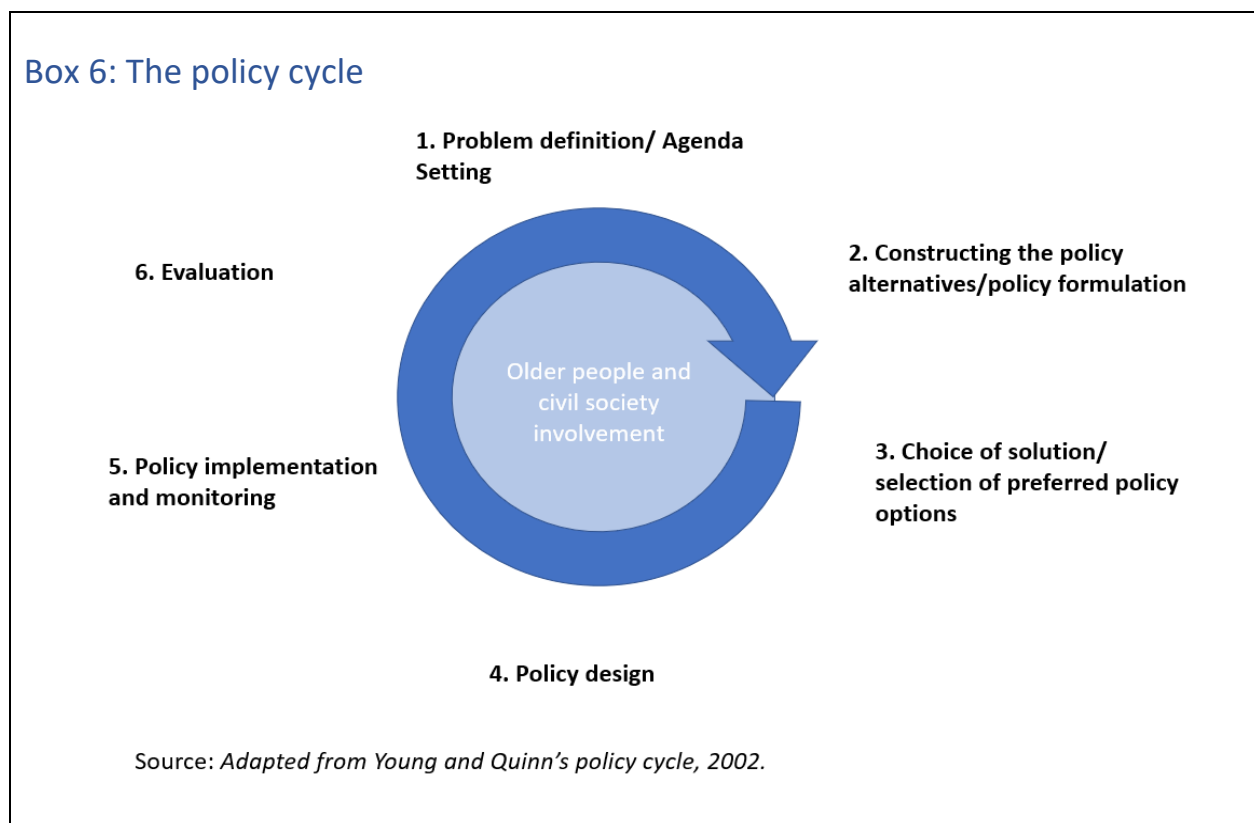
4. ENABLING FACTORS AND KEY ACTIONS FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Engagement should be regarded as an important governance norm which can strengthen decision-making and produce positive outcomes for all, including older persons.²⁵ This section provides an overview of factors that can create an enabling environment to support meaningful participation. Each area suggests key actions and points to consider.

4.1 Older persons and civil society involved in all stages of the policy cycle

- *Embed older persons and civil society's participation throughout all stages of the policy cycle*

Older people's councils or groups are often involved in consultative processes. However, consultation can be limited to collecting opinions and frequently results in low-profile deliberation.²⁶ For participation to be meaningful, older persons and civil society organizations should be part of the agenda setting from the beginning of the process and involved in every stage of the policy cycle.²⁷ To facilitate this, the principle of meaningful participation should be embedded throughout the policymaking process.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Involve older persons and civil society not only in the development of ageing policies or policies seen to affect older persons, but also mainstream policy processes.
- Ensure opportunities for participation are provided in advance and early in the process and provide enough time to enable their participation in a meaningful way across all stages of the policy cycle
- Use participatory approaches that are at the higher end of the continuum of participation.

4.2 Political commitment, capacity, and resources to establish participatory processes

- *Establish and institutionalise participatory processes involving older persons and civil society*
- *Appoint focal points on ageing in all line ministries and at all levels of government*
- *Ensure sufficient financial and human resources are allocated for participatory processes in policymaking*

One of the most important factors for meaningful participation relates to governments taking a leadership role by involving older persons and civil society in policy development. A key challenge can be a lack of awareness of ageing issues, lack of political leadership and limited financial and human resources to coordinate participatory processes. It is essential for political commitment to be at the highest level and for relevant resources to be provided for the implementation of meaningful participatory processes. Appointing focal points on ageing in all line ministries and at all levels of government can help to ensure older persons and civil society are at the table and involved when new sectoral policy is planned at the local and national level.

Some governments that already involve civil society and older persons in their stakeholder

engagement and participation processes should consider reaching out to more diverse groups as discussed in previous sections to make the process more inclusive.

A key risk can be a change in government and change in policy priorities. Legislation that legitimises participation of older persons in policymaking is one way to ensure spaces for consultation and participation are not closed.

Participatory processes should be institutionalised to encourage and sustain participation.²⁸ In Poland, for example, seniors' councils gained a legal basis for their existence in 2013 when the Act on Municipal Self-government was amended.²⁹ The act encourages municipalities to set up seniors' councils so that older persons could have a platform to represent their interests, needs and influence in local decision making and to support their participation in local activities.

Activities initiated by seniors' councils in Poland include the inclusion of ageing-related issues in regional strategic documents, running information campaigns, promoting active senior citizenship and a positive image of ageing, setting up databases containing information on organizations working for older persons, providing training programmes for social workers specialising in activating senior communities, and promoting intergenerational relations, including through volunteering.³⁰

Consulting stakeholders to inform ageing-related policy – examples from Canada, France, and Ireland

In Canada, examples of specific consultation efforts have included, for instance, activities pursued by the Ministerial Advisory Board on Dementia, and those conducted by the National Seniors Council as well as the Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors Forum consultations with stakeholders on various issues. Older persons and stakeholder groups with expertise in seniors' housing were also consulted and provided feedback during the extensive National Housing Strategy consultations in 2016 and the Human Rights-based Approach to Housing consultations in 2018. The Financial Consumer Agency of Canada also engaged with multiple stakeholders as part of its consultation efforts to identify banking challenges experienced by older persons, which led to the creation of a 'Code of Conduct for the Delivery of Banking Services to Seniors', adopted by the banking industry in July 2019.

In France, a broad national consultation on 'older persons and autonomy', conducted between October 2018 and February 2019, brought together various stakeholders. The consultation and public debate were organized at national and territorial levels. At the national level, ten workshops were held, bringing together representatives of the State and local authorities, experts, older persons and representatives of associations and federations of users and professionals. The topics covered were for instance governance and steering, seniors' pathway, the future service offer for older persons in loss of autonomy, professions, etc. These workshops were organised in four main stages: diagnosis, prioritisation of objectives, identification and then deepening of the paths chosen, formalisation and validation of the findings. Regional forums mobilised several hundred institutional bodies, operators and associations of beneficiaries and carers to share their field analyses and draw inspiration from their good practices. A citizens' consultation was also carried out to allow everyone to express their views. There were numerous and rich contributions. The aim was to give a voice to older persons cared for in institutions and at home, caregivers, and professionals, through discussion groups and individual interviews.

In Ireland, as part of Ireland's National Positive Ageing Strategy, a stakeholder forum is held each year since 2017. The purpose of this stakeholder forum is to highlight areas of policy impacting older persons in Ireland that the stakeholders believe the Government should prioritise. The forum is attended by representatives of government departments, states agencies, local authorities, civil society, and older persons themselves. In 2018, the stakeholder forum identified 'ageing well in the community', 'health literacy for older persons' and 'transport for older persons in rural areas' as key areas for action. The Department of Health working with the stakeholders made progress in each of these 3 areas during 2019.

Source: Country Notes on Mainstreaming Ageing - unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Provide training for government officials in participatory policymaking and how to mainstream ageing in policy.
- Appoint focal points on ageing in all ministries and at all levels of government.
- Secure sufficient financial and human resources.
- Ensure there are spaces for the participation of older persons through legislation or other means.

4.3 Collaborative multi-stakeholder approach

- *Involve multiple stakeholders, including older people's groups, in national coordinating processes on ageing*
- *Ensure the approach includes clearly defined roles for stakeholder participation*

Collaboration and effective partnership between governments, civil society, the private sector, and older persons are essential for a participatory approach to policymaking. Each play different roles in developing policy and if engagement is effective, policies will be stronger from using a collaborative approach. Processes should be transparent, and stakeholders should have clearly defined roles (see Box 7).

Box 7: Examples of stakeholders and their potential roles in policymaking	
<i>These examples are illustrative and not exhaustive.</i>	
Stakeholder groups	Roles in policymaking
Older persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming older people's groups • Partnering and working collaboratively with civil society and governments • Campaigning to raise awareness about issues that lack exposure
Civil society, including older people's organizations, associations, or councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating information, data, and conducting analysis • Engaging in consultation processes and providing feedback on analysis and assessment of ageing-related priorities and policy • Raising awareness about older persons' rights and contributions • Facilitating or supporting participatory consultation processes at different levels (local and national) • Advocacy with governments and service providers • Acting as implementing partners • Training and skills building with older people's groups • Creating national ageing networks • Monitoring the implementation of policies • Running campaigns to address ageism and other barriers to participation • Convening spaces and channels for older persons to have their voices heard by decision-makers
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating the policy development process in partnership with other stakeholders • Coordinating relevant government line ministries and departments • Identifying stakeholders to be involved in the participatory process and create space for older persons, civil society, and other stakeholders • Providing financial resources and institutional mechanisms needed to implement participatory approaches • Communicating and keeping stakeholder groups informed about the progress and steps in the policymaking processes and how their contributions will be used

National stakeholder network – example from Italy

In Italy, a national stakeholder network was established within the project “National multilevel co-managed coordination of active ageing policies in Italy”. It consists of representatives of the main governmental levels (i.e. Ministries, Departments at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Regions, Autonomous provinces), other relevant government agencies, as well as representatives from civil society (Third Sector, NGOs, experts, academia, etc.). The network contributes in a consultative/co-decisional way. It meets periodically to discuss the work plan and agree on activities to be carried out. It works in close collaboration with a project team, that is responsible for the implementation of the planned tasks.

Source: UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- A collaborative approach to policymaking requires government and civil society to work closely together across sectors and levels of government.
- Inadequate communication or undefined roles between stakeholders can act as a barrier to collaboration and should be avoided.³¹
- Ensure opportunities for participation are provided in advance and early in the process.³²
- Community-based organizations and older people’s groups should consider working together to build a network so that their combined voices can be strengthened.

4.4 Convening spaces for the participation of older persons

- *Facilitate the establishment of older people’s groups and involve them in policymaking at different levels (local to global)*
- *Provide ‘invited spaces’ to support the participation of older persons*
- *Create spaces for older persons to tell their own stories from their own perspectives*
- *Consider power-relations within older people’s groups*

Older persons directly experience the impact of ageing policies, programmes and efforts. Their contribution to the development of policies is therefore essential. In many countries, older people’s groups act as important mechanisms for older persons to convene, develop a collective voice, build capacity to engage in policy processes and hold decision-makers to account. These spaces can offer an enabling environment for meaningful participation in policy processes.

Older people’s groups can be created by older people themselves at the community level (*claimed spaces*) while others are established by NGOs (*created spaces*). Governments also create advisory or consultative bodies (*invited spaces*) that support decision-making related to older people. These bodies vary in reach (local and national) and the types of activities conducted, and they support the interests of older people at different levels.³³

Many countries in the UNECE region have advisory bodies of older people that have been established to support their participation in local and national policy processes.³⁴ Older people’s councils, where existent, should be involved in policymaking processes. In Finland, over 90 per cent of people over 65 live in communities in which senior councils operate. In Germany, local senior councils have been in operation since the 1970s and there are currently around 1200 of them across the country.³⁵ Space for older persons to come together collectively is important, but there can also be challenges. For example, membership may be open to all, but participation may require individuals to register.

This can mean that more marginalised older persons do not opt-in because they are not aware of the process or may face other barriers to participation. Civil society can play an important role to encourage more diverse membership and reach those who have been marginalised.

The balance of power within groups and how this may affect whose voices are heard should also

be considered. Within older people's groups and councils, there can be different levels of input by individuals and participation in meetings may be unequal. While some older persons have experience in these forums, others will not. This can mean that their opinions and experiences may not be voiced or heard. Another risk is that those who are more engaged in participatory processes speak on behalf of older persons, but they represent personal or sectarian agendas.³⁶

Political participation of older persons – example from Flanders, Belgium

Ninety percent of Flemish and Brussels municipalities have a local older people's council (*conseil local des aînés*). These councils are the main channel for the participation of seniors in politics. They play a crucial role as a sounding board and spokesperson. They provide information and advice to the community, represent the interests of older persons, and promote full social participation. The local councils offer older persons the opportunity to work together on specific issues and to contribute to an inclusive policy. They are a means for reaching, engaging, and involving individual older persons in local politics.

The landscape in which local older people's councils evolve is changing with the emergence of spontaneous citizen initiatives, action groups, neighbourhood committees, among others, in which older persons are also involved and provide their expertise, experience, and insights to contribute to shaping the local situation.

Existing and well-established concertation structures, such as the local older people's councils, and new forms of participation should not contradict each other. Rather, it is necessary to examine how they can be mutually reinforcing, what possibilities there are for collaboration on policy matters, and how the grassroots behind local actions and spontaneous citizen initiatives can also have their voices heard in the older people's councils.

In addition, there are 23 regional platforms for the political participation of older persons throughout Flanders. They convene the local seniors' councils in their region three times per year to exchange information and experiences, to inspire each other, and to offer trainings in close cooperation with the with the Flemish Older People's Council (*Vlaamse ouderenraad*).

These regional platforms are headed by an interregional steering group for the political participation of older persons, which supports the work of these platforms. These structures are important channels of communication, dissemination of information, exchange, and support provided to local older people's councils.

At the level of Flanders, the *Vlaamse ouderenraad* formulates opinions on all matters concerning older persons, whether at the request of the Flemish Government, the Flemish Parliament, or a strategic advisory council.

Source: Country note on mainstreaming ageing – Belgium

Older People's or Seniors' Councils – examples from Austria, Ireland and Slovakia

In Austria, there is a Senior Citizens' Advisory Council at the federal level and there are several advisory councils at subnational level. The Federal Senior Citizens' Advisory Council meets once a year – or at the request of its members - under the chairmanship of the Minister for Labour, Social Affairs, Health, and Consumer Protection as a political dialogue on ageing policies. Its members comprise representatives of all ministries, of the provinces, of social partners and of senior citizens organizations. Since 2000, the Senior Citizens' Council as the federation of all Senior Citizens' Organizations as well as the umbrella of youth organizations "Federal Youth Representation" have the status of social partners and have the right to give their comments on every law concerning younger or older persons.

In Ireland, there is an Older People's Council in each of the 31 Local Authority areas. This is a representative group of older people, established by local authorities as part of the development of the Age Friendly City/County programme. The group of older people identify priority areas of need, raise issues of importance, and inform and influence the decision-making process of the City or County Age Friendly initiative. Representatives of Older People's Councils participate, alongside representatives of the relevant member agencies, on the Age Friendly City/County Alliance. In addition to taking on specific commitments related to the implementation of the Age Friendly City/County Strategies, the Older People's Council also provides a citizen or service user perspective in monitoring the implementation of those strategies. The Older People's Councils are representative of the diversity of the older population in the city or county, linked to local older people's groups and supportive of the participation of the most marginalised.

In Slovakia, a Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the Rights of Seniors and the Adaptation of Public Policies to the Population Ageing Processes was established in 2014. It is chaired by the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. The Council was set up as a specific advisory, initiating and coordinating body to provide cooperation and to ensure a systematic approach to the issues of seniors' rights, living conditions, equal opportunities and equal treatment of seniors and closer cooperation of stakeholders. There are eight self-governing regions in Slovakia. Their governors and regional councils have decision-making competencies for example on health care or education. All self-governing regions actively assess policies and measures in terms of their impact on seniors. Representatives of cities, municipalities and self-governing regions councils are active members of the Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the Rights of Seniors and the Adaptation of Public Policies to Population Ageing. At regional level, authorities involve older persons in the policymaking process through established older people's councils/boards as initiative and advisory body of the mayors.

Source: Country Notes on Mainstreaming Ageing - unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Facilitate the creation of convening spaces for older persons.
- Establish communication channels and access for older people's groups to decision-makers.
- Consider the role of those who act as intermediaries or interlocutors between older persons and power holders in relation to convening spaces and channels
- Consider the power dynamics in groups that impact who has a voice and who speaks on behalf of whom.
- Promote diversity and gender balance of older people's groups and councils. In some contexts, it may be appropriate to create separate groups, for example older women's groups.

4.5 Diverse voices

- *Ensure the participation of diverse groups in policy processes*
- *Address the barriers to the participation of older persons from diverse backgrounds*

Older persons are not a homogenous group. Experiences of ageing are different for different people and depend on various characteristics that are also influenced by their lived experiences. For any policy process to be meaningful, diverse voices must be included and efforts must be made to include those who face marginalization and barriers to 'invited spaces'. Gender, age, health and disability status, ethnicity, location, education, and socio-economic status, among others, can intersect to create multiple disadvantages for some older persons and policies will therefore affect people in different ways. Including older persons from diverse backgrounds, will provide a spectrum of views, new ideas for thinking about policy issues and can also expose the different types of discrimination that older persons experience. It is therefore essential that diverse voices are heard to inform policy development.

Claimed spaces (created by older persons at the community level) are often where people from minority groups feel safe to participate and express their views.³⁷ In order to engage diverse

voices it may be useful to reach out to different older people's groups and encourage their collective participation. For example, a community group of older migrants.

To ensure diverse and inclusive participation, consider including:

- Older women, their organizations, or networks
- Organizations of people living with disabilities
- Older migrants
- Older persons who identify as LGBTIQ+
- Older persons living in a range of care settings
- Informal carers
- People living with dementia
- Older refugees
- Indigenous populations
- Intergenerational representatives
- Older persons living in poverty
- Older persons in rural areas

This is not an exhaustive list and will likely differ depending on each country's context. When thinking about reaching these groups, it is important to think *how* to reach them (e.g. through a local service provider or NGO) and which approach to use (e.g. a focus group with an older women's group).

Engaging diverse groups – examples from Canada

The Government of Canada engages with a wide range of stakeholders to develop and implement initiatives that promote the well-being of older persons in Canada. Mechanisms are in place at various levels of government to involve older persons in the policymaking process. Several provinces and territories as well as numerous municipalities have established committees comprised of seniors, senior organizations and/or experts to advise the government on senior-related policies and programmes. Stakeholder engagement typically targets seniors themselves, as well as academics, private sector, and civil society charitable and advocacy organizations, who are reached through various engagement activities such as online consultations, surveys, and roundtables.

The Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors Forum has developed numerous reports and products to raise awareness of issues related to ageing in Canada, some of which target specific groups. For example, the Forum commissioned the development of three resources, called Supplements, to address the social inclusion needs of three specific sub-populations of seniors that may be at high risk of being socially isolated, namely: recent immigrant and refugee seniors, LGBTQ2 seniors, and indigenous seniors. These tools and guidelines assist people and organizations who want to host effective meetings to exchange ideas and respond to the social isolation of seniors of these vulnerable sub-groups.

In line with Canada's commitment to building new relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership, the government department Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) recognizes the distinct cultural role of Indigenous Elders and the unique context of Indigenous seniors. To help departmental officials engage with Indigenous Elders respectfully and in accordance with departmental policies, ESDC has created an Elder Protocol Guide and supports the inclusion of Indigenous Elders and seniors in engagement activities that inform policymaking.

The different toolkits and resources are available on the Canada.ca website:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum.html>

Source: County Note on Mainstreaming Ageing – Canada.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Support the creation of claimed informal spaces as they help people who are more marginalised feel safe to have their views heard.
- Consider the best ways to include of a diverse range of older persons and how to address any barriers they may face to participate.

4.6 Inclusive participatory approaches and tools for engagement

- *Consider the diversity of existing stakeholder engagement mechanisms*
- *Consider approaches that go beyond consultation and are further along the continuum of participation*
- *Involve older persons and civil society organizations in designing the approach and deciding on the tools to be used*
- *Consider the barriers older persons face and which tools are most appropriate to support their participation*
- *Ensure venues and activities are designed to be accessible*
- *Invite older persons with different types of disability and provide support to those who may have communication barriers to fully participate*

Careful consideration should be given to the participatory approaches and tools used to engage stakeholders in policymaking processes.

This should be decided at the beginning stages of any process in collaboration with older persons and civil society who can guide policymakers as to which tools and approaches will be most appropriate.

Barriers to the inclusion of older persons can be environmental, including physical barriers to accessing spaces, or social, economic, cultural, or psychological and include barriers to information and communication. Participatory activities should be organised in a way that allows older persons to participate fully including those living with a disability.

A recent study reviewed participatory policy initiatives with older persons in Europe and found that the vast majority used consultative approaches with older persons in the policy design, rather than approaches that were co-decisional.³⁸ It is important to go beyond consulting and consider using tools that have more of a two-way relationship between older persons/civil society and governments and are further along the participation continuum (see Box 1).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Consult older persons, and their representative organizations about their preferred communication style, formats, and approaches.
- Providing accessible information on laws and policies is fundamental for people at the grassroots to participate more directly in policymaking.
- Participatory processes should be designed to remove barriers that exist for older women and those who have been excluded.

4.7 Strong civil society and ageing networks

- *Strengthen the role of civil society in policymaking*

A strong civil society can act as an enabling factor for meaningful participation and can facilitate a range of perspectives to be considered and valued. Civil society organizations who work with older persons are well-informed about issues

facing older persons. They play an important role in sharing information with governments and providing spaces for older persons to connect with decision-makers. However, civil society organizations can face challenges if there are restrictions on civic space, insufficient resources and/or restrictive political or legal environments.

In some countries, ageing networks and coalitions exist and act as a powerful voice on ageing issues at the national level. They can

analyse policies, support consultation processes, and reach out to the older persons they work with. Different organizations will have access to different older persons. For example, a local NGO may work with older persons who live in

rural areas or those who are excluded for various reasons. Building ageing networks facilitates reaching out to and including older persons from diverse backgrounds.

National civil society networks on ageing and older persons – examples from Germany, Slovenia, and the Republic of Moldova

In Germany, stakeholders are consulted on ageing-related issues and are heard as experts in the legislative process. The Government closely cooperates with the umbrella organization of more than 110 NGOs – the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organizations (BAGSO). Regular contact ensures that the needs and interests of older persons can be better incorporated into the national policy-making process.³⁹

In Slovenia, the Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Associations – ZDUS proactively participates in policy processes that affect older persons. ZDUS reviews all legislative proposals and contributes reports and assessments of the situation of older persons to monitoring and implementation reports, including on MIPAA.

In the Republic of Moldova, a Platform on Active Ageing was set up by the Government and HelpAge Moldova with the aim to mainstream ageing into public policies. The Platform is made of diverse organizations and has analysed over 30 policies and contributed to the development of the National Development Strategy of Moldova 2030.

Source: Country notes on Mainstreaming Ageing - unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing and information provided at Online workshop on Making Participation Meaningful

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- NGOs or bigger organizations may be more likely to gain official credibility and funding for participatory initiatives than older people's organizations or smaller community-based organizations.
- Civil society should reconsider the practice of speaking on behalf of older persons and how to facilitate their direct participation.

4.8 Training and skill-building for older persons to engage in policy processes

- *Provide accessible information and training to older persons about their rights and entitlements and how to engage in policy processes at different levels*

- *Provide digital training to older persons to ensure they don't face digital exclusion*

Individuals and communities have a right to participate in the development of policies that affect their lives. To participate, older persons need to know what their rights are, what services are available to them, how to monitor services and engage with decision-makers. With digital

services becoming more widespread, some older persons may also need training in the use of technology.⁴⁰

Training and skill-building can support older persons to play an active role in policymaking processes. Training initiatives can build their confidence, willingness, and practical skills to be a part of policy processes. Civil society organizations and governments can provide training and skill building so that older persons

can identify their concerns, analyse the link to policies and be able to effectively advocate with decision-makers. This is a crucial component of meaningful participation.

As well as older persons receiving training, another important factor is building the capacity of civil society actors. A community organization might have the expertise to set up older people's groups but not to train older persons on their rights and self-advocacy.

Training older persons on their rights – an example from Serbia

The Red Cross of Serbia began supporting older persons to establish self-help groups in 2011. In the beginning, local branches of the Red Cross across Serbia were trained on how to establish self-help groups at the community level. Interested local branches began to support older persons to initiate groups in their municipalities. At the end of 2018 there were 33 local Red Cross of Serbia branches across the country with active self-help groups, and a total of 1,010 older members. The groups are self-organising, and members decide on a group leader. Self-help groups have meetings to discuss different issues of concern for older persons and their communities and try to find potential solutions. Through their engagement in these groups, it has led members to shift their perceptions of their role and position in society.

The Red Cross of Serbia provides training to the groups to help improve their understanding of their rights and entitlements. Older persons in the groups have come to recognize that government and service providers are not always acknowledging their rights, and that therefore older persons have a role to play in holding government to account. Older persons feel they have the skills to advocate with government actors to ensure they are delivering on their responsibilities to society in general, and to older persons specifically.

Source: Based on various information provided by the Red Cross of Serbia - <https://www.redcross.org.rs/en/>

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Training should be accessible. Consult older persons, and their representative organizations about their preferred communication style, language and formats for any training or skill-building activities.
- Consider the diversity and gender balance of those older persons participating in training (refer to the list of those who may normally be excluded in section 4.5)
- Consider power relations within the groups and ensure that everyone has a chance to participate.

5. DESIGNING A STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION PROCESS

When designing a stakeholder engagement and participation process it is important to think about the enabling factors to ensure the process is meaningful. Below is an example and suggested steps for a participatory policymaking process.

- Step 1** Establish institutional arrangements that lay the basis for the participatory approach.
- Step 2** Identify the *stakeholders* to be involved in the policymaking process. These should include different government ministries, older people's groups, non-governmental/civil society organizations, academic institutions, the private sector, local authorities, and particular interest groups and do an initial analysis of their interests, influence, and capacities.
- Step 3** As a part of the stakeholder mapping, specific effort should be made to identify and include older persons from diverse backgrounds (see section 4.5).
- Step 4** Establish a *working group* that would include representatives of the above stakeholder groups.
- Step 5** Design and implement a process whereby the working group can *collect and analyse information* on the policy issues identified, including direct feedback from older persons from diverse backgrounds and other more participatory and interactive methods as appropriate, as well as review of secondary data, interviews with key policymakers, etc.
- Step 6** Organise a series of *consultation and dialogue* forums to elicit feedback. These consultation and dialogue activities may be run jointly with or delegated to some of the representative intermediary organizations identified in step 2. The working group should also consider using participatory approaches that are further along the participation continuum (see section 4).
- Step 7** Arrange for several *reporting back* sessions to bring the findings of step 5 & 6 back to the policymakers and other decision-makers within the government/organization, and to enable them to reflect on the implications of these findings for the policy design. Also feedback to those who participated in the review including older persons.
- Step 8** Facilitate a high-level workshop to discuss *policy options* and decide on the way forward.
- Step 9** Devise and implement a *communication* strategy to inform the public and stakeholder groups about the outcomes of the participatory process and the progress in finalizing the policy in collaboration with key stakeholders.

6. CONCLUSION

Older persons have a right to participate in policymaking processes. Implementing participatory policymaking means that older persons should have the opportunity and skills to meaningfully participate in public decisions that affect their lives, hold decision-makers to account and provide feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of policies.

7. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

OECD (2001) *Citizens as Partners: OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making* [Citizens as Partners - OECD HANDBOOK ON INFORMATION, CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN POLICY-MAKING \(internationalbudget.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/publications/citizens-as-partners-2001/)

UNDESA (2006) *Guidelines for review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing: Bottom-up participatory approach* <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/documents/MIPAA/GuidelinesAgeingfinal13%20Dec2006.pdf>

UNECE (2021) *Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing* https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/ECE-WG.1-37_Guidelines_for_Mainstreaming_Ageing_1.pdf

UNESCO *Inclusive Policy Lab: Analytical framework for inclusive policy design* <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/analytical-framework-inclusive-policy-design>

UNESCAP *Training reference materials: Effective Stakeholder Engagement for the 2030 Agenda* <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Final.Effective%20Stakeholder%20Engagement%20for%20the%202030%20Agenda%20rev.pdf>

UNDESA and UNDP *What is a 'good practice'? A framework to analyse the quality of stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda*

This guidance note has outlined the specific barriers that older persons experience in participating in policymaking and provides suggestions on how to make sure approaches and activities are meaningful. It is hoped that policymakers and civil society will find this a useful tool in designing meaningful participatory approaches.

<https://www1.undp.org/content/oslo-governance-centre/en/home/library/what-is-good-practice.html>

UNDESA (2020) High-level political forum on sustainable development: Handbook for the preparation of the Voluntary National Reviews https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25245Handbook_2020_EN.pdf

WHO (2018) *Fact sheet on ageing and health* <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>

CBM *Disability Inclusive Development Toolkit* <https://www.cbm.org/article/downloads/54741/CBM-DID-TOOLKIT-accessible.pdf>

HelpAge International (2009) *Older people in community development: The role of older people's associations (OPAs) in enhancing local development*, HelpAge International, [Briefing 8 pages 30 Sept-kamin.indd \(helpage.org\)](https://www.helpage.org/publications/briefing-8)

Government of Catalonia (2020) *Guide to gender mainstreaming in participatory processes* <https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc954.pdf>

UNECE Policy Brief No. 23 on Gender Equality in Ageing Societies, <https://unece.org/policy-briefs>

UNECE Policy Brief No. 21 on Combating Ageism in the World of Work, <https://unece.org/policy-briefs>

Developing a life course approach to women's rights and gender equality, 2018 Age International and GADN <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2018/11/20/developing-a-life->

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8. END NOTES

¹ Definition adopted from CIVICUS, Rietbergen-McCracken, J. (2020) accessed:

https://www.civicus.org/documents/toolkits/PGX_F_ParticipatoryPolicy%20Making.pdf

² UNECE (2021) Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/ECE-WG.1-37_Guidelines_for-Mainstreaming_Ageing_1.pdf

³ UNECE *Making participation meaningful: bringing governments and civil society together* (online workshop 21 April 2021) <https://unece.org/population/events/meaningfulparticipation>

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⁵ UNESCO: Inclusive Policy Lab accessed: <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/policy-marker-social-inclusion-inclusive-policies/participation-throughout-policy-cycle>

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¹⁰ United Nations (2006) Guidelines for review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing – Bottom-up participatory approach, United Nations, 2006.

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¹² CIVICUS, Rietbergen-McCracken, J. (2020) accessed:

https://www.civicus.org/documents/toolkits/PGX_F_ParticipatoryPolicy%20Making.pdf

¹³ *This chart has been developed using various sources that look at participatory approaches, tools and participation scales including a CIVICUS paper, an OECD Handbook: Citizens as partners, Marilee Karl's continuum of participation.*

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¹⁴ UNDESA (2006) Guidelines for review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing: Bottom-up participatory approach.

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- ¹⁶ Falanga, R., Cebulla A., Principi A., Socci M. (2021) *The Participation of Senior Citizens in Policy- Making: Patterning Initiatives in Europe*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18, 34. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18010034>
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- ²⁵ UNDESA (2008) *People Matter: Civic Engagement in Public Governance*, World Public Sector Report, accessed: <https://publicadministration.un.org/publications/content/PDFs/E-Library%20Archives/World%20Public%20Sector%20Report%20series/World%20Public%20Sector%20Report.2008.pdf>
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³⁹ Germany's country note on mainstreaming ageing, accessed:
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