

# Political commitment

How to build the case for a Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Ageing?

**UNECE Mainstreaming Ageing Toolkit**



## Introduction

Population ageing will affect almost all aspects of society. A comprehensive policy response is needed that **anticipates, prepares** for, and **mitigates** the impacts of a change in the population's age structure on the economy, society, the environment and different generations.

A future-oriented and holistic approach can seize the opportunities that individual longevity and ageing populations bring by enabling individuals to age healthily, learn and develop new skills throughout life, extend their working lives and participate in, and contribute to, society in diverse and meaningful ways throughout their lives.

The UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing recommend the development of a Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Ageing to support the systematic integration of ageing issues in public policies with the aim of adapting societies to individual longevity and population ageing and creating a society for all ages.

Political commitment is a precondition to building the institutions and mechanisms that are needed for mainstreaming ageing to work.

## What is this tool about?

This tool gives you suggestions on how to make the case for mainstreaming ageing to win political support for the systematic integration of ageing issues in policymaking. It focuses on the following five areas:

- 1 Framing the challenge
- 2 Demonstrating the need for action
- 3 Highlighting the costs of inaction and benefits of preparedness
- 4 Connecting the dots across sectors
- 5 Joining forces to advocate for change

## Population ageing needs to be clearly positioned as a key societal challenge for the future that concerns all ages.

Population ageing is not recognized as a key driver for sustainable social and economic development. While many countries have adopted national and sectoral policies on ageing or older persons, individual and population ageing are not systematically considered in broader policymaking and there is little accountability for the longer-term implications of political decisions taken today for future generations.

The current climate crisis has raised public awareness and mobilised public pressure about the responsibility of current generations to protect the planet for future generations to come. A long-term perspective is equally needed for the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development.

A strategic approach to mainstreaming ageing creates the conditions for this to happen: by generating knowledge and data on ageing, bringing all age groups and stakeholders around the table, and developing strong mechanisms for enhanced awareness, coordination and collaboration, mainstreaming ageing methods and processes aid planning and acting for the future and ensuring that decisions taken today are generation and future "proof".

Do we today have institutions and mechanisms in place that ensure that demographic change and its implications for economies, societies and individuals are systematically taken into account and addressed?

# Political commitment is a precondition for mainstreaming ageing

Leadership on mainstreaming ageing is needed to ensure that ageing is recognized as a transformative process that needs to be systematically addressed in all policy fields and at all levels.

The buy-in and political **commitment** at the highest political level and by all relevant stakeholders and decision makers is needed to establish the necessary mandates, institutionalise mainstreaming ageing through agreed processes and facilitate information sharing, **coordination** and collaboration between multiple stakeholders.

Data, analysis and stakeholder perspectives can be drawn upon to compile **evidence** to inform decision-makers about the anticipated impacts of longevity and population ageing on the economy, the welfare state and society and why it is important prepare. At the same time ageing-related research, data and stakeholder participation provides knowledge about the situation and needs of different age groups across the life course.

Political commitment, the mandate for action and the allocation of adequate resources will contribute to building **capacity** for mainstreaming ageing in terms of knowledge, skills, and methods of age-sensitive analysis and impact assessments to consider and address the potential impact of new laws, regulations, policies or programmes on different age groups and generations and their contribution to societal adaptation to population ageing.



# Why mainstreaming ageing may not yet be a political priority

Political leadership focuses on the **short-term** (period during which they are in office) – adaptations to population ageing will pay out in the longer term but may be unpopular in the short term (e.g. pension reforms)

**No perceived urgency** as impact of population ageing will be felt in the future

**Lack of awareness** on ageing issues

No public pressure

Ageing is **not a priority**

**Lack of political attention**

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## Obtaining political commitment for Mainstreaming Ageing

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**1** **Frame the challenge** - ageing impacts all aspects of society and all ages

**2** Demonstrate the **need for action**  
Convey **urgency** – action must be taken now as adaptation takes time.

**How to build the case?**

**3** Calculate the **costs of inaction** and **benefits of preparedness**

**4** Emphasise the **need to work across siloes** as ageing requires a **cross-sectoral policy response**

**5** **Join forces in advocating for change** – mobilize support across sectors and generations

# 1 Frame the challenge

Population ageing needs to be clearly positioned as a key societal challenge for the future that concerns all ages and all aspects of society.

If ageing is too narrowly framed around older age or the needs and rights of older persons it will remain marginal and may not be considered a societal priority.

Ageing concerns everyone. Individuals experience diverse ageing trajectories across the life course with evolving needs and capacities, opportunities and challenges related to living longer. Public policies can better realise the potential of longer lives by fostering healthy ageing, lifelong learning and preparing for longer working lives from an early age.

Population ageing from a societal perspective with its broader implications for economies, labour markets, education, health, social protection and pension systems requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response.

Inaction, and the resulting unpreparedness for the implications of population ageing, can lead to increasing financial burden, shortages of skilled labour, overwhelmed health and care systems struggling to meet growing demand and maintain quality of services, and inequity if the risks and costs of population ageing are unfairly distributed between social groups and generations.

It is important to take action now to better understand and anticipate the longer-term implications of population ageing, raise awareness and prepare societies to ensure sustainable social protection and social security systems, thriving economies, prosperity and well-being for both current and future generations.

- ⇒ The demographic transition to population ageing will strongly shape our future.
- ⇒ Human rights of all generations are jeopardized if societies do not prepare and adapt to population ageing.
- ⇒ The generations are interdependent, and each should be enabled to realize their full potential.
- ⇒ No generation should be unfairly burdened by the consequences of insufficient preparedness, and none neglected and left behind.

**Neither longevity, nor older persons or the ageing of the population is the problem but if we do not prepare for the changes ahead.**

## 2 Demonstrate the need for action

Draw on demographic data and projections to provide evidence for the demographic transition to population ageing your country is undergoing

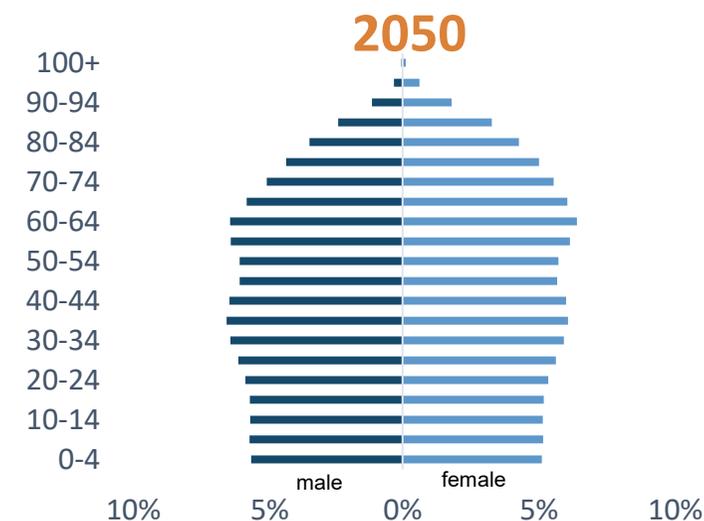
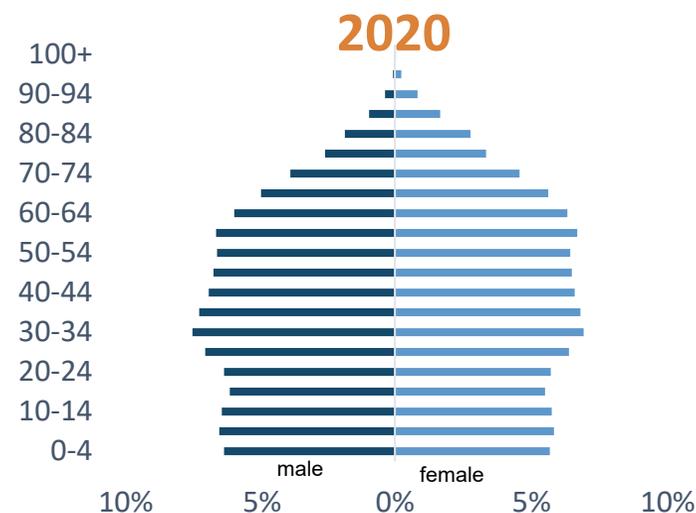
People in the UNECE region are living longer.

Life expectancy at age 65 has increased from **16.3** years in 2000 to **18.9** years in 2020. Women aged 65 could expect to live another **20.3** years compared to **17.2** year for men on average in the UNECE region.

The proportion of older persons is growing.

In the UNECE region as a whole, the proportion of older persons 65 and over is expected to grow from 16.9 per cent in 2020, to 20.4 per cent in 2030, reaching 24.3 per cent by 2050. The proportion of the population aged 80 and above will double over the next three decades, from 4.5 per cent in 2020 to 9 per cent in 2050. Over the same period, the proportion of children and youth (0-24) will decrease from 30 per cent in 2020 to 29 per cent in 2030 and 27 per cent by 2050.

As the population pyramid on the right illustrates, there will be a growing proportion of persons beyond retirement age relative to a shrinking working age population.



Source: 2019 Revision of World Population Prospects  
\*Except Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, San Marino

## Convey urgency for action

Population ageing is a gradual process and for many countries the tangible effects will only be felt in decades to come. There is not yet a sense of urgency that would push population ageing to the centre of political attention as is currently the case with climate change.

As many adjustments take a long timeframe to yield tangible results, these need to be initiated long in advance. Decisive action needs to be taken now to:

- prevent population ageing from becoming a burden on service providers, businesses, youth and families
- ensure that old age income levels remain adequate for generations to come and that their sustainability is ensured
- ensure that service provision for older population meets growing needs while ensuring investments in children and youth
- ensure lifelong learning and adequate skill levels across the life course to enable longer working lives and adaptation to technological change
- Combat ageism to enable all generations to realise their full potential

A look at other countries that are already more advanced in their transition to aged populations can provide an outlook on possible consequences of population ageing on the economy, society, families.

Regional and international organisations such as the European Commission, the OECD, and different United Nations entities regularly issue reports providing analysis, projections and suggested policy actions which can provide evidence and examples on which to draw to complement national data and evidence.

**Mainstreaming ageing provides analytical tools and processes that enable policy makers to anticipate and prepare for population ageing in advance and to choose policy directions based on the best available evidence.**

### 3 Highlight the costs of inaction

Available measures such as demographic **old-age and economic dependency and support ratios** provide powerful tools to demonstrate the financial implications of growing proportions of older person relative to those of working age.

While they draw attention to important changes in age structure, and potential financial implications if no corrective action is taken, they may represent older age groups as "dependent", "unproductive", and "expensive", burdening the younger generations needed to support older age cohorts. A discourse that pitches generations against each other is counterproductive.

However, it is clear that the status quo is not financially nor economically or socially sustainable. In building the case for decisive action, it is useful to demonstrate who will carry the burden of inaction and bear the burden of rising costs or potential deterioration in number and quality of services offered.

**Taking action now will be key for the prosperity and well-being of future generations.**

#### Risks of inaction

- Social protection and pension levels cannot be maintained for future generations
- Shrinking labour force may result in lower productivity and staff/talent shortages
- Demand for health and care services will rise
- Health and care workforce shortages may affect access to and quality of services
- Potential set backs for gender equality and human rights
- Intergenerational solidarity and equity may be affected

#### Who will carry the burden of inaction?

- **Older persons** – old age poverty, ageism, inadequate health and care services
- **Working age population** – burden of financing increased welfare spending, increased (informal) care needs, while facing falling social security for their own future
- **Youth** – risk further erosion of welfare for their own old age
- **Sub-national and local governments** if they have responsibility for social care, services etc.

## 4 Connect the dots across sectors

The implications of demographic change are being felt in diverse policy domains, beyond the those most visible which are pensions, health and social care.

Building the case for mainstreaming ageing should **highlight** the connections and spill-over effects across policy sectors and emphasize the importance of seeking policy coherence and integration of policy actions. This requires improved communication and coordination across sectors.

**Developing an evidence-based narrative** that stresses **opportunities** and **win-win scenarios for each sector**.

Gather data and illustrative examples pertaining to key policy priorities to highlight the influence of demographic change and population ageing on achieving them (for example sustainable development, poverty prevention, economic growth, innovation).

- ⇒ Economic prosperity for all
- ⇒ Financial sustainability of the Welfare State
- ⇒ Social cohesion
- ⇒ Intergenerational solidarity and equity



## Adaptation to population ageing contributes to sustainable development

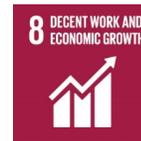
1. Population ageing can spur economic growth while maintaining fiscal sustainability, but policies and behaviour play important roles

2. Promoting gender equality in employment and adopting family-friendly policies can improve labour force participation and lead to more rapid economic growth (SDGs 5 and 8)

3. Eliminating age-related discrimination, including age barriers in employment, can reduce inequality, increase productivity and promote economic growth (SDGs 8, 10, 16)

4. Investing in education and health and well-being for all, including lifelong learning, can improve productivity and maintain economic growth even as the share of working-age population shrinks (SDGs 3 and 4)

5. Promoting retirement savings can improve financial independence of individuals and increase aggregate capital accumulation (SDG 1)



6. Adopting social security reforms that consider the widening gap in longevity by socio-economic status can help reduce inequality (SDG10)

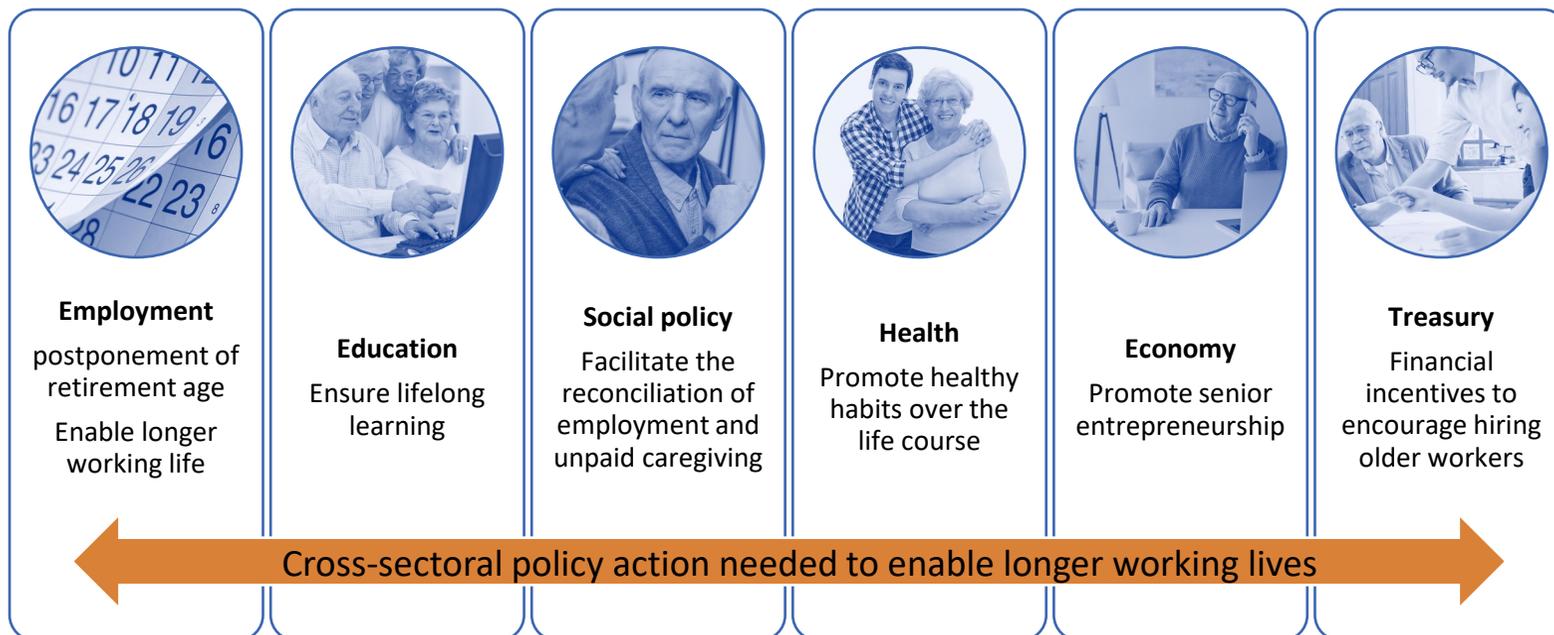
7. Establishing universal social protection with adequate benefits is key to reducing poverty and inequality and to promoting social inclusion (SDGs 1, 8 and 10)

8. Promoting lifelong health and preventive care to maintain maximum functional capacity of individuals can improve health and wellbeing (SDG3)

9. Fostering a balanced approach to financing old-age consumption can help to ensure generational equity and fiscal sustainability (SDGs 8 and 10)

10. Improving data collection and analysis of population and economic linkages can provide vital new evidence for policymaking (SDG 17)

## Mainstreaming ageing facilitates coordination across policy fields



Policy coherence and integration of policy actions requires improved communication and coordination across sectors.

**Mainstreaming ageing can build the bridges to foster cross-sectorial awareness, exchange, coordinated action and collaboration for concerted action.**

## 5 Join forces - stronger together

Today, advocates who protect the needs, rights and opportunities of each age group, or "generation", often operate in silos, competing for attention and scarce resources. At the same time different life stages are part of the life course and ageing trajectory of each individual. Today's youth will be tomorrow's older people.

Taking a people-centred rather than life stage-focused perspective on ageing enables us to consider ageing as a dynamic process along the life course rather than equating it with "old age".

When it comes to building the case for mainstreaming ageing it is therefore important to highlight that ageing is everyone's business as we all are at any time of our lives, ageing.

Mainstreaming ageing is an age-inclusive process which is not limited to integrating the needs of older persons in all policies but promotes considering the needs of all age groups and aspects of intergenerational equity in the policy response to population ageing.

- ⇒ This broadens the base of beneficiaries of mainstreaming ageing
- ⇒ It allows to integrate the various age-related agendas under the umbrella of mainstreaming ageing which can give the concept more "currency"
- ⇒ It strengthens the basis for truly applying a life-course oriented and intergenerational approach to policymaking

Joining forces for a society for all ages in which the potential of individuals at all stages of their lives is realised, their needs met, and their human rights protected requires:

- ⇒ Inter-generational dialogue
- ⇒ Identification of common goal, joint interests and mutual trust
- ⇒ Strengthening the "intergenerational contract" in light of changing social, environmental and economic realities to ensure that intergenerational equity and solidarity are protected and nurtured to affront the challenges of the future together
- ⇒ The principle of intergenerational equity needs to be institutionalized to build trust that policymakers today and tomorrow take full account of the potentially negative impact of today's decisions on different age groups and generations, current and future.

**A key recommendation when building the case for mainstreaming ageing is to forge alliances across generational stakeholders, integrating life-course, gender equality and human right dimensions with economic considerations.**

## Further readings

[European Commission \(2020\) Report on the impact of demographic change](#)

[European Commission \(2021\) The 2021 Ageing Report. Economic & Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States \(2019 – 2070\). Institutional Paper 148. May 2021](#)

[EUROSTAT Fact Sheets on Demographic Change in Europe \(May 2020\)](#)

[OECD \(2020\) Promoting an Age-Inclusive Workforce. Living, Learning and Earning Longer](#)

[OECD \(2020\) WHO Cares? Attracting and Retaining Care Workers for the Elderly](#)

[UNDESA World Population Ageing 2019 : Highlights](#)

This tool is part of the UNECE Toolkit for Mainstreaming Ageing, developed to support the implementation of the recommendations made in the

[UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing](https://unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing)

It is a living document that will be updated regularly as new evidence and resources become available.

More tools and resources on Mainstreaming Ageing are available on

[unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing](https://unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing)

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