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10:40 – 11:00

Keynote speech¹

Priorities for ageing policies in the UNECE Region

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[Note to interpreters: The following text is a slightly abbreviated version of the speech to be delivered. Please check against delivery.]

SLIDE 1

According to the title of my presentation, I will review priorities of policies on ageing in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. I will also discuss the progress in advancing these priorities. Finally, I will talk about possible adjustments to the regional actions on ageing in the new reality that is rapidly emerging at the regional and global levels.

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The region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, abbreviated UNECE, is the largest region within the UN system of geo-political classification.

The UNECE region is also the oldest in the world. This is illustrated on the slide by one of the demographic indicators, the median age, for the UNECE region compared to other world regions.

The UNECE region, and especially Europe, is the cradle of the demographic transition. It is also the birthplace of policy responses to population and individual ageing.

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In modern times, all major milestones of international actions on ageing have been linked to the UNECE region: among them the first World Assembly on Ageing; the United Nations Principles for Older persons; and the Second World Assembly on Ageing.

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2022 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Second World Assembly on Ageing, which was held in Madrid, Spain. This year we also review *progress* in the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging, which was adopted twenty years ago in the Spanish capital.

However, the history of international action on ageing goes back more than twenty years. It began forty years ago in another European capital city – Vienna.

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In the summer 1982, the Austrian capital city hosted the first World Assembly on ageing, which was convened by the UN and the Austrian government. The first Assembly culminated in the adoption of

¹ A keynote address on “Priorities for ageing policies in the UNECE Region” will open the deliberations of the thematic expert panels. [Ref.: Annotated provisional agenda for the Ministerial Conference, ECE/AC.30/2022/1]

the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing – the first international policy framework on ageing. Along with substantive contemplations, the Vienna Plan included sixty-two recommendations for action in seven “areas of concern to ageing individuals”...

The Vienna Plan of Action was designed to shape responses to ageing at various levels: international, national and local (community).

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The latest history of global ageing also began in our region. The start date was April 2002, and the milestone was the Second World Assembly on Ageing, which was convened in Madrid, Spain. The Second World Assembly sought to answer several key questions:

- What approaches are needed to seize the opportunities and address and prevent the challenges of population and individual ageing in countries at different stages of the demographic transition?
- How to balance and reconcile demographic ageing and societal development?
- What comprehensive and sustainable actions should be promoted in traditional areas of concern to older individuals such as health, independence, and security and safety.

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The Madrid Plan contains objectives and actions formulated in three priority directions:

- I. Older Persons and Development
- II. Advancing Health and Wellbeing into Old Age
- III. Ensuring Enabling and Supportive Environments.

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The diversity of challenges and opportunities of ageing in different parts of the world has prompted the “regionalization” of the Madrid Plan of Action. Each of the five UN regions has developed a regional policy framework. Such a framework, entitled the Regional Implementation Strategy for the Implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action was developed in the UN ECE region in September 2002, shortly after the Madrid Assembly, at the Ministerial Conference on Ageing in Berlin, Germany. This regional implementation strategy is well known in the UNECE region and beyond under the acronym RIS/MIPAA. RIS/MIPAA is based on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA); it provides a regional focus for the implementation process.

How has the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action and its RIS evolved in the UNECE region?

What priorities were set and followed?

What implementation goals have been agreed upon and progress made towards them over the 20 years of implementation?

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Progress in the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action is assessed every five years through a review and appraisal process. Such a process starts at the national level, continues at the regional level, and then moves to the global phase at the UN Headquarters during the session of the

Commission for Social Development. In the UNECE region, the regional process culminates in regional ministerial conferences on ageing. And here in Rome, we are just for this purpose.

Since the adoption of the Madrid Plan of Action, three reviews and appraisals have been carried out. The first two reviews and appraisals had *global* themes. Within the UNECE region all reviews and appraisals received their own *regional* theme. We are now in the middle of the fourth review and appraisal with the UN ECE regional theme: *A Sustainable World for All Ages: Joining Forces for Solidarity and Equal Opportunities throughout Life*.

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Starting with the second review and appraisal, each UNECE ministerial conference, along with a regional **theme**, has formulated **policy goals** for the next five-year implementation cycle. One of the central tasks of the Rome Ministerial Conference is to agree on the policy goals for the next five years.

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Examination of the themes and goals agreed at the regional conferences allows to identify the main policy priorities on ageing in the UNECE region. A consolidated set of such priorities is presented on this slide. These priorities include: development of ageing societies; rights: human, social, economic and other; active ageing, inclusive of health, participation and security/dignity; inter-generational equity and reciprocity; and life-long individual development.

The foundations of these priorities lie in the international policy frameworks on ageing: the Madrid Plan of Action, with its three priority directions, and the Regional Implementation Strategy for the UNECE Region, containing ten commitments.

Above this short set of priorities, mainstreaming is placed. While mainstreaming is not a policy priority in itself, it is considered a central approach to translating the agreed policy goals into concrete actions within the priorities for policy actions.

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Where are we now, twenty years after the adoption of the Madrid Plan of Action and its Regional Implementation Strategy, RIS/MIPAA, and forty years after the adoption of the Vienna Plan of Action? Have these twenty or even forty years been years of success or failure?

There are no simple answers to these questions. The reason is that *we do not have agreed criteria and tools for assessing the progress of policy action on ageing*.

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Shortly after the Second World Assembly on Ageing, back to 2006, the UN Secretariat produced the 'Guidelines for review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing'. The Guidelines were intended to assist national Governments in carrying out a bottom-up review and appraisal of the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action. Among the various ideas and models, the Guidelines described three types of assessment tools:

first, participatory assessment tools for a bottom-up approach, such as *focus groups; time-use surveys; livelihood analysis; resource mapping; individual interviews*, and other;

second, instrumental, or **output**, indicators, to calculate the deliverables of national and international programmes and plans;

and, **third**, outcome indicators, to evaluate the **impact** of policy actions.

There is another useful assessment tool, the widely known Active Ageing Index. This index for the fourth review and appraisal of the RIS/MIPAA was recommended by the UNECE Secretariat.

...

As of now, the appraisal of progress in the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action and its regional strategy RIS/MIPAA continues to be based on self-reporting submissions, anecdotal evidence and subjective conclusions.

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Based on the review and appraisal processes, all three of them, can we really tell how far the Member States of the United Nations have come in achieving the goals and objectives of the two Plans of Action?

The information presented on this slide is taken from the United Nations reports on the Review and Appraisal of the Vienna and Madrid Plans of Action.

On the left side of this slide are the excerpts from the global reviews and appraisals of the implementation of the Vienna Plan of Action. On the right side of this slide are brief quotations from the United Nations Review and Appraisal reports on the Implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action. Similarities are obvious. And the brief overall conclusion is evident: the implementation progress has been limited and uneven.

Why for all these forty years the progress in policy actions on ageing has been so slow?

One can suppose that the barriers, or obstacles, to implementation of international policy documents on ageing exist on both **national** and **international** level. Moreover, the international policy frameworks on ageing, including the Madrid Plan of Action and its regional implementation strategies, have their **inherent limitations**.

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At the **national** level, the barriers to the implementation have been identified in the UN reports on the implementation of the Vienna and Madrid Action Plans and are summarized on this slide.

The similarities between the barriers to the national implementation of the two Plans are evident.

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Barriers to the **international** implementation process include the following:

- **Insufficient coordination:** only three professionals work in the UN focal point on ageing (within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs). These three professionals oversee the **global** follow-up process of implementation. The staffing situation at UN ECE is no easier.
- **Marginal technical support for building national capacity on ageing in less developed countries:** these days the technical support is provided primarily, if not exclusively, by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, UNFPA - one of the UN family organisations. Following the first World Assembly on Ageing, the now forgotten UN Trust Fund for Ageing had granted substantive support to technical cooperation activities in developing countries and countries in transition. Shortly before the Second World Assembly on Ageing the resources of the Fund were depleted and never resurrected owing to rather sluggish fundraising efforts.

- One more barrier: **Very limited analytical capacity of the UN Secretariat on Ageing** to ensure evidence informed implementation of the international policy documents on ageing. To establish a solid evidence base for international action on ageing, a permanent database of public policies on ageing on the Internet was proposed about twenty years ago. This proposal, which is still valid today, received specific support from the Dutch government, but was abandoned during the preparations for the Second World Assembly on Ageing.

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Implementation flaws are also inherent in the international policy frameworks on ageing themselves, including the Madrid Plan. None of these documents are legally binding. This means that governments are not responsible for reporting their national implementation progress. Several decades of tireless efforts by non-governmental organisations including HelpAge International and a few committed governments have not so far led to a global consensus on developing a legally binding instrument on ageing such as an international convention.

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New reality brought new challenges for national and international actions on ageing.

COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine affect the implementation of the UN strategic policy documents, including those on ageing, and question the relevance of the current policy approaches to population and individual ageing.

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Never before in human history has ageing been a major determinant of the course of epidemic.

The pandemic has drawn particular attention to the plight of older persons. Older persons are recognized as the main victims of the new pestilence.

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The war in Ukraine does not promise to end soon. And again, older persons are among the victims of the atrocities brought by Russian invasion. Strangely, there is no mentioning the war in Ukraine in the draft Declaration of our Conference.

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The Madrid Plan of Action has a separate priority issue on older persons in emergency situations. Two objectives are formulated within this priority issue.

Eighteen actions are proposed to reach these two objectives. However, the question is whether the proposed actions are sufficient and adequate to a humanitarian catastrophe unprecedented since the Second World War.

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In this anniversary year, we must ask several key questions: Are we adequately equipped to meet the *traditional* and *new challenges* of individual and population ageing? Have we learnt how to utilize the *opportunities* of ageing societies, the *opportunities of longevity*? Are we ready for a *new reality*? ...

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First of all, the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing and its regional implementation strategies need to be scrupulously *reviewed* and if necessary *revised*: what needs to be added and what should be removed.

Reactive efforts to meet the needs of older people must be complemented by **proactive efforts** to adapt the entire society to the demographic transition and build a society for all ages, as envisaged by the Madrid Plan of Action.

Persistent measures are needed to promote the **life-course approach** to ageing and **multi-generational cohesion**. Such measures should establish the **preventive dimension** of policy on ageing. A robust preventive dimension is needed for reducing the negative impact of population ageing and harnessing the potential of mature societies. Corresponding priority and measures are proposed in the draft Declaration of our Conference.

The world must be provided with a clear vision and practical tools for adjusting to the demographic transition. In essence, *the policy of ageing must be replaced by the policy of and for longevity*.

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Second action: Establishment of a respected, financially sound, and professionally operated agency to coordinate and support the policy of longevity. The UN global focal point on ageing needs to be transformed into a real coordinating centre with sufficient financial and human resources for providing technical support and policy know-how. Ideally, an international entity on ageing could be established. Perhaps such an entity could be considered in the UNECE region.

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Third action: Development and adoption of an international convention on older age rights. A sound perspective should be given to an international legally binding instrument on ageing, a long-awaited convention

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The twentieth anniversary of the Madrid Plan of Action offers a pretext for thoughtful analysis and revision of actions on ageing. The ongoing fourth review and appraisal will help identify the gaps. Information about successful models and failed attempts can form the basis for the analysis and revision of international and national policies on ageing. Changes are needed not simply in the procedure of implementing the recommendations of the Regional Implementation Strategy, but in our approaches to building a society for all ages.

Business as usual with annoying mantras and calls to “redouble the efforts” would be counterproductive and can lead to the traditional depressing acknowledgement of uneven progress, which is essentially a euphemism for failure.

The new reality demands change in our thinking and action.