

Opening: UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing

Rome, 16 June 2022

Speaking notes for Ms Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary

Minister Elena Bonetti, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,

I welcome you all,

- representatives of the member States,
- experts of the scientific community and members of civil society,
- as well as colleagues from international organisations,

to this Ministerial Conference on Ageing.

The theme of the Conference is:

A sustainable world for all ages: Joining forces for solidarity and equal opportunities throughout life

There is a lot of work to be done behind these words.

They call on all of us to work together and create societies for all ages, and for both the current and the future generations.

Over the next two days, our discussions will focus on different aspects of this joint effort:

- First - Promoting active and healthy ageing throughout life,
- Second - Ensuring access to long-term care and support for carers and families, and
- Third - Mainstreaming ageing to advance a society for all ages.

Let me say a few words about each of these three elements.

1. Promoting active and healthy ageing throughout life...

...begins with the recognition that every human being at any point of their lives is ageing. And that the experiences, skills, attitudes, but also disadvantages we accumulate from early childhood are determining for our quality of life at older age.

It is essential that we do not limit ageing to older persons, pensions and care, but focus on the entire life course. We need to recognise that prevention and creating equal opportunities in all fields of life are important prerequisites for health, participation and income security at older age.

A second important point here is the mutually reinforcing nature of active ageing and healthy ageing.

10 years ago, the UNECE member States strongly endorsed the concept of active ageing in the Vienna Ministerial Declaration. Since then, many countries have shaped their policies and programmes to promote active ageing. At the same time, the currently ongoing United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing has focused attention at ageing in good health, with action plans and initiatives spreading across our region.

I would like to stress that active ageing and healthy ageing cannot exist without each other. Active participation in society, longer working life, active support to family members, or participation in lifelong learning at older age are all, to a certain degree, dependent on good health. On the other hand, active lifestyle, engagement in the community and strong social connections can positively influence our prospects for ageing in good health.

We cannot pretend that by living actively we could certainly avoid all the health problems commonly associated with older age. But we can reduce the limitations they cause. This is where creating a world for all ages comes in strongly. It is a world in which homes, transport systems, workplaces, products, services and communities are built in a way that enables independence, choice and active participation at any age, even when health declines.

Now let me turn to our second priority area.

2. Ensuring access to long-term care and support for carers and families...

...is crucial in our ageing societies.

Long-term care needs and the demand for well-trained health and social care workers is rising rapidly in many countries of our region. To keep up with this demand, several countries have adopted systemic reforms and innovative approaches, but there is still a long way ahead of us. Take, for instance, the availability of long-term care services. Often they are limited to cities or larger settlements, leaving older persons in rural and deprived areas behind.

A second important factor to consider is quality. Mechanisms need to be established to ensure that older persons, regardless of their income, can access the same minimum quality standards in care. Dignity and self-determination in long-term care settings have to be upheld as well. This also includes the possibility of choice – some older persons wish to receive care at home, while others may opt for supported housing or residential facilities – but their preferences should be respected at all times.

COVID-19 has taught us many lessons about long-term care and held up a mirror to the flaws of our health and social care systems. It revealed the great dependence of our long-term care systems on the dedication of care professionals, and especially of informal carers and families.

Now that the pandemic has finally ceased to dominate our agendas, we should not forget what it taught us, and we should take all the necessary steps to be better prepared for potential future health crises. This includes improving the working conditions of care workers, ensuring adequate staffing, and creating comprehensive support frameworks for informal and family carers that help to reconcile paid employment and care responsibilities.

Finally, our third priority, and some would say the most important.

3. **Mainstreaming ageing to advance a society for all ages...**

...touches upon everything I mentioned before. It is about how to make “a world for all ages” happen.

Mainstreaming ageing in simple words means taking into consideration the fact of population ageing in policy making in all sectors, such as health, education, transport, housing, energy, and even tourism to mention only a few.

Mainstreaming ageing needs to happen:

- at all levels – national, regional and local;
- and with all stakeholders, such as civil society, social partners, service providers, the private sector, researchers. And importantly, with older persons themselves.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

We have convened here in Rome this week to review what has been achieved over the last five years in implementing the goals of the Lisbon Ministerial Declaration.

In 2017, in Lisbon, UNECE member States pledged to realize the potential of living longer. I am very pleased to be able to say that many policies have since been adopted and action taken to turn this promise into reality.

Population ageing is a policy challenge that we all face.

Regional cooperation enables us to learn from each other’s successes and failures, and I highly appreciate your continued commitment to the mechanisms for regional cooperation that we have put in place.

Your numerous and high-level presence here in Rome is testimony to it.

The UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing, established nearly 15 years ago, is a unique intergovernmental platform for cooperation and exchange on implementing the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and its Regional Implementation Strategy.

Its recent change of status from an "ad hoc" to a "standing" working group with a long-term mandate is testimony to the importance of population ageing for the region. It also demonstrates member States' recognition of the value of regional cooperation in this field.

Finally, I would like to note that reliable and relevant data are essential for making the right decisions at the right time. The COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of having accurate information almost in real time. UNECE is actively engaged in advancing ageing-related statistics. We are happy to see that many of you continue to refer to the Active Ageing Index, which is a unique tool in the area of ageing-related statistics.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Italy for hosting the Conference and for providing us with an opportunity to finally meet face to face in the "Eternal City" of Rome.

I would also like to thank the members of the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing and all our partners with whom we share a common commitment to work towards a sustainable world for all ages, including UNFPA, WHO, and the many partners representing civil society and the research community.

I wish you all a fruitful and engaging exchange over the next two days!