

UNECE Online Policy Dialogue
Older Persons in Vulnerable Situations

28 June 2023

Report

The online event on “Older Persons in Vulnerable Situations” held on 28 June 2023 was organised to provide an opportunity for discussing concrete policy strategies to protect older persons in vulnerable situations and share key recommendations from the latest [UNECE Policy Brief of Ageing No. 28](#). Around 60 representatives from government, civil society, the scientific community and international organisations participated in the event.

The event was kicked-off by Lisa Warth (Senior Social Affairs Officer & Chief Population Unit / Statistical Division, UNECE) who welcomed participants and stressed the timeliness of the topic.

Emma Maun (Researcher, Institute of Gerontology, Department of Global Health & Social Medicine, King’s College London) provided participants with a conceptual framework for understanding older persons in vulnerable situations. In her presentation, Ms Maun explained that vulnerable situations occur in specific periods of time due to a change in individual or societal circumstances in at least one relevant area of life, such as health, housing or income. Vulnerable situations, according to Ms Maun, have the potential to overwhelm coping resources and create negative impacts on individuals’ lives. Furthermore, Ms Maun stressed that at any age, intersecting factors such as poverty, social isolation and exposure to abuse can increase the risk of vulnerability and weaken resilience in the case of adverse events. However, as highlighted by Ms Maun, older persons often face greater risk of exposure and have fewer coping resources than younger persons. Ms Maun ended her presentation by stressing that persons can move in and out of situations of vulnerability, thus underscoring the potential for policy interventions.

After the presentation of the conceptual framework the event featured three concrete examples of policies / projects aimed at protecting older persons in vulnerable situations:

First, Deirdre Connolly (Programme Manager, Health and Social Care Standards, Health Information and Quality Authority of Ireland (HIQA)) presented how the [National Standards for Adult Safeguarding](#) is a key driver in quality and safety for people in health and care systems, including mental health services in Ireland. As Ms Connolly pointed out, the Standards also aim to act as an impetus to recognise good practice and address poor performance. Ms Connolly explained that the issue of safeguarding is a very important aspect of all national standards developed by HIQA and the Mental Health Commission (MHC), and an important focus of the regulation, inspection and monitoring process. At the same time, according to Ms Connolly, the Standards for Adult Safeguarding are based on a person-centered, human-rights based approach that aims to prevent abuse and respond to it when it occurs. A key feature of the Standards are the comprehensive training tools to support staff to implement Standards, including an online training course which more than 30,000 persons have completed, which have greatly improved the understanding of safeguarding issues among staff in the healthcare system.

Next, Mathieu de Greef (Professor, Center for Human Movement Science, University of Groningen) provided participants with an overview of the [Sociaal Vitaal](#) community-based healthy ageing strategy.

As Professor de Greef explained, the project aim is to enhance physical activity and physical fitness and decline loneliness in frail older adults (55-85 years of age) living in deprived neighbourhoods, being at higher risk of low social economic status, poor health literacy, and lower life expectancy. The project operates in a context in which 21 percent of older persons (65+) in the Netherlands are considered frail in terms of their health, thus presenting a major challenge that the Sociaal Vitaal strategy aims to address. The project is comprised of an evidence-based intervention that includes a comprehensive health screening of participants and a combination of self-management, exercise, resilience and health education classes over a period of 30 weeks. Since 2016 more than 80 Sociaal Vitaal interventions with more than three thousand participants have been implemented, resulting in important improvements in physical activity, feelings of loneliness and resilience according to professor de Greef.

Finally, Tatiana Sorocan (Country Director, HelpAge International, Republic of Moldova) presented about the [Safe Spaces for Youth, Women, and Older People](#) project. As explained by Ms Sorocan, the project, which was financed by UNFPA, came about as response to war in Ukraine and associated refugee crisis and humanitarian disaster. Ms Sorocan explained that about 15 percent of refugees from Ukraine are older persons. The aim of the Safe Spaces project is to build resilience and coping strategies with focus on prevention of abuse and social participation as highlighted by Ms Sorocan. Furthermore, the project aimed to address specific vulnerabilities experienced by older refugees from Ukraine. To address this challenge, Ms Sorocan explained, the Safe Spaces project offered comprehensive support to older persons, as well as other persons in need of help in five facilities and with the help of 45 staff, including many young volunteers. Specifically, the Safe Spaces focused on developing coping strategies, for instance to respond to Gender Based Violence, and for empowering individuals. More than 24,000 persons have benefited from the programmes. In her presentation Ms Sorocan pointed out that, despite the success of the programme, one key challenge was the relative lack of research to inform the development of the project.

After the presentations, Kieran Walsh (Professor of Ageing and Public Policy & Director of the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, University of Galway) provided perspectives on behalf of the research community. Professor Walsh reinforced the key recommendations made in Policy Brief No. 28 on how to generate information on older persons in vulnerable situations. In his commentary, he first stressed the importance of designing and funding research studies that take into consideration the diverse mechanisms and multidimensional aspects of vulnerability. Secondly, Professor Walsh highlighted the importance of disaggregated data for investigating different sub-groups of older people and to respond to the heterogeneity among older persons. Thirdly, he stressed that the intersection between age and vulnerability brings unique challenges, for research as well as for the design of relevant policies, making it important to apply a life-course approach to this issue. Finally, Professor Walsh underscored the importance of individuals' agency, even in situations of great vulnerability. In consequence, according to Professor Walsh, we should challenge the discourse around vulnerability to make sure it is appropriate, while allowing agency to flourish.

The discussion with participants of the event focused on questions related to the exact definitions of what constitutes an older or vulnerable person, what lessons we have learned from the Covid-19 pandemic for supporting older persons in vulnerable situations as well as a possible convention on human rights of older persons.