



Summary report

Promoting civil and political participation of older persons

Part of the series “An engaged civil society as engine for an age-friendly society: an international exchange“

Thursday, 18 April 2024, online

Moderation: Silvia Perel-Levin

Civil and political rights

Today, it is largely taken for granted that citizens have a say in public decisions, have access to public goods and services and can exercise their right to vote. At the same time, older people in many countries face obstacles when they want to exercise their civil and political rights, as the experiences from Germany, Israel, Spain and Poland will show. Age discrimination also plays an important role here.

With the adoption of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) by the United Nations (UN) in 2002, governments committed to ensuring that older persons can fully enjoy their civil and political rights. In 2022, the states of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) reaffirmed this commitment in its Ministerial Declaration resulting of the UNECE Conference held in Rome.

To strengthen civil society participation within the UNECE region, BAGSO and its partners are organising this event series which was kicked off in November 2023 with a hybrid event about the voices of older persons at the United Nations. The online seminar in April 2024 put spotlight on the experiences of older persons in exercising their rights to civil and political participation at national and local levels.

How do older persons exercise their right to civil and political participation?

The examples from Germany, Israel, Spain and Poland showed how older persons participate in public decision-making processes in their immediate living environment.

Esther Klein from Israel spoke about her experience as a member of a generation that contributed to building Israel as a nation in general and in particular about her experience as activist since January 2023, when the current right-wing government was formed and started its anti-democratic judicial revolution. In her fight for Israel to keep its democratic character, she participated in protests, together with a diverse crowd of people, including many older persons. Esther Klein spoke about the sense of togetherness that was created during these protests in which she participated on a weekly basis for over a year. Her family joined her in this activism. One of the highlights she reported on was the protest of the women in red who marched in absolute silence and with their heads down, advocating for women's rights. Esther Klein concluded by saying that it would be difficult for her to imagine a situation in which she would not be able to exercise her right to participate.

José Luis Téjedor of the Association of Retired University Professors from Spain spoke about the campaign "I'm old, not idiot", started in December 2021 by Dr Carlos San-Juan on change.org. The campaign call was addressed to Spanish banks who are increasingly digitalising their services. Due to the importance of this problem for many older persons in Spain, the campaign received a lot of attention, even internationally, and the petition was signed by over 600.000 people in very little time. José Luis Téjedor emphasized the role of banks as public service providers which should oblige them to provide a good service to all customers, especially the most vulnerable. The initiator of the campaign, Dr San-Juan was invited by the Minister for Economy and in the end, his activism led to a new protocol on the financial inclusion of older persons by the banking sector. As part of the protocol banks committed to extending the opening hours of face-to-face service to cover at least from 9am to 2pm for cash service. They also committed to offering mandatory specific training for the staff of the commercial network on the needs of older costumers.

Piotr Nakonieczny of Bonum Vitae, member organisation of AGE Platform Europe, shared his experience of a project addressed to older people in Poland before the 2024 European Parliament elections. Main goal of the "AGE = equal rights at all ages" project was to ensure and strengthen the commitment of all Polish candidates in the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 and their political parties in working for equality. Bonum Vitae developed an action plan for implementation in several regions of Poland, covering the area of larger agglomerations, i.e. Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, Katowice, Kraków and Lublin. Part of the activities were a training for older persons and an online conference about age equality. Aim of the project was to get support for the establishment of the Intergroup for Age Equality in the 2024-2029 term of the European Parliament and for the proposal of the European Age Equality Strategy. The project allowed to develop educational materials that can be used in social welfare centres, care homes, seniors' clubs and councils as well as local educational entities for older persons.

Uta Saenger from Germany spoke about her experience with the “OMAS GEGEN RECHTS” (Grannies against the right-wing), a non-partisan civil society initiative founded in Germany in 2018, inspired by the Austrian initiative with the same name. Nowadays, there are already around 200 regional groups committed to a democratic society organised under the rule of law. The group stands for the participation of all citizens, for respect and esteem - regardless of religion and origin, age and gender - and for hard-won social standards and women's rights. Uta Saenger reported that the initiative grew out of the need to oppose right-wing extremist and anti-democratic tendencies and organise political resistance against all forms of exclusion and racism, anti-Semitism and group-focused misanthropy. In the initiative, like-minded people of all generations and genders are welcome. “The oldest of us experienced the horrors of National Socialism. Our generation grew up with traumatised parents. Now we are concerned about a shift to the right, here and in Europe - and worldwide. No one wants to remain silent about this anymore,” reported Uta Saenger. The experience shows that many women find it easier to do this with the OMAS rather than committing themselves to political parties. The initiative is also committed to climate protection and stands side by side with Fridays for Future. (In May 2024, OMAS GEGEN RECHTS was awarded the Aachen Peace Prize for its commitment.)

What does this mean from a human-rights perspective?

Sarah Loriato from AGE Platform Europe highlighted the different human rights that the panellists had spoken about: the right to vote, the right to assembly and the right to participation. She also acknowledged the challenges that older persons face when exercising their civil and political rights. This is also linked to the lack of accessibility in terms of training, which is essential if people are to participate in an informed and meaningful way. Intersectionality is another point highlighted by Sarah Loriato. Older women, older persons with disabilities, older migrants and older LGTBQI persons are mostly under-represented in decision-making. She also commented on the fact that older persons often stand in for the interest of their communities and the future of coming generations. According to Sarah Loriato is therefore important that older people have a say in all policy areas, not only those in relation to old-age pensions, health and care, as illustrated by the initiatives presented. A UN convention on the rights of older persons would be an important instrument to overcome existing barriers to create an inclusive community and to ensure full civil and political participation by older persons.

What next?

In a final panel discussion, Martin Amberger, National Focal Point on Ageing of Germany at the Standing Working Group on Ageing of the UNECE, Dr Lisa Warth of the Secretariat of the SWGA and Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf, representative of civil

society at the SWGA spoke about their impressions and next steps. The panellists highlighted the importance of civil society organisations' participation at the SWGA and the UN in general. Their work is important to bring the voice of older persons to the debates.

For Lisa Warth the event series has the potential to be a strong and powerful tool to strengthen civil society in the region and foster collaboration across borders. In her view, at the UN, the voice of the civil society organisations is much needed because of their crucial role in supporting governments to place older persons' rights and population ageing on the agenda.

For Martin Amberger, the updating of the Regional Implementation Strategy of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA/RIS) of the UNECE offers a concrete opportunity for civil society to influence policymaking in the years to come. A taskforce of the SWGA has just started its work to provide guidelines on how to involve civil society and academia in this process. These guidelines are to be published mid-2024¹ and provide national governments with ideas on how to consult with civil society and academia between mid-2024 and mid-2025. Aim of these consultations is to identify the most important challenges and areas that require increasing attention by governments in the coming years. It is of utmost importance to have diverse civil society participation in this process and for older persons to share their experiences.

Heidrun Mollenkopf spoke about the importance of capacity building and networking. Her experience shows that it is often difficult to identify speakers for international exchanges. In her view, reasons for this are limited time and a lack of confidence, sometimes combined with a lack of language skills. It is therefore important, according to Heidrun Mollenkopf, to encourage individuals to speak for oneself and support organisations that represent older persons. She went on to say that it is also very important to bring younger and older generations together in order to facilitate an exchange between them. In concluding, she emphasized how important it is to bring people together to stand together for democracy and solidarity.

Next online seminar of this series: Wednesday, 11 December, 2024 at 2pm CET

Dates of online seminars in 2025 and 2026 to be confirmed.

¹ The document is available via the Secretariat of the SWGA of the UNECE (unece.ageing@un.org)

More information

To stay up to date about events and activities of the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing and the Population Unit subscribe this email list:

<https://mailchi.mp/c724ac44ab35/unece-swga-newsletter>

Background material

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