

## Summary report

### Conference “The voice of older people at the United Nations”

Kick-off of the event series “An engaged civil society as engine for an age-friendly society: an international exchange”

**Wednesday, 8th November 2023, Bonn/online**

**Moderation: Dr Lisa Warth und Ina Voelcker**

#### Issues of ageing at the United Nations

Increasing digitalisation, climate change and population ageing pose major challenges and opportunities for societies worldwide. At the United Nations (UN), these issues are also being discussed and different frameworks adopted by its Member States. But to what extent are older people involved and considered?

Civil society organisations have an important role alongside states at the UN in influencing the work of the international community, for example, through the delivery of statements at meetings or the participation in consultations. However, effective participation requires more than just time and commitment.

What expertise is needed to influence the work of the UN and help shape future policy? What processes offer entry points to bring in the voice of older people? And what are the immediate benefits of international agreements for ageing policy at national level?

These are the questions that have been addressed in the joint event of the Secretariat for International Policy on Ageing of BAGSO, the German National Association of Senior Citizens’ Organisations, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), AGE Platform Europe, the NGO Committee on Ageing Geneva and the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). It was shown how civil society can influence discussions at the UN and, conversely, how international agreements can be used to represent national interests.

The conference was the kick-off of the event series entitled “An engaged civil society as engine for an age-friendly society: an international exchange”, as part of which

two online seminars will be held annually between 2024 and 2026. Representatives of civil society will have the opportunity to learn about the international framework conditions and engage in a dialogue with non-governmental organisations from countries in the UNECE region.

Nicole Zündorf-Hinte, Head of Division at the BMFSFJ, welcomed the participants online and in Bonn, the German city of the United Nations, and thanked the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture for making their premises available. Ms Zündorf-Hinte pointed out the importance of the participation of civil society at the UN, also for the work of the German Government. Older people are making their voices heard internationally, true to the slogan “Nothing about us without us”, which has become established as part of movement around the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). To enable the participation of civil society in decision-making, infrastructures are needed in civil society, such as the Secretariat for International Policy on Ageing of BAGSO, which is funded by the BMFSFJ.

Currently, the participation of civil society is particularly relevant for the execution of a task that the Member States of the UNECE have to carry out: the updating of the Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) for the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). This was adopted in Madrid in 2002 and continues to be an important political framework for international policy on ageing.

Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf welcomed the participants as Chair of AGE Platform Europe, the European umbrella association of organisations of and for older people, as BAGSO board member and representative of civil society at the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing (SWGGA) in Geneva, which was set up in 2008 as part of the implementation of MIPAA. Dr Mollenkopf thanked the Ministry and the cooperating partners for their support. The starting point for the conference and the subsequent events were the UNECE Ministerial Conference and the Joint Forum of Civil Society and Scientific Research, which took place in Rome in June 2022. The aim of these events was to review the implementation of MIPAA and the RIS. Following the conference, civil society in particular expressed the wish to remain in closer and more frequent contact, according to Dr Mollenkopf. Another reason for this event series was the decision to entrust the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing with the task of updating the RIS. The involvement of civil society is a central component of this task.

Ina Voelcker, Head of the Secretariat for International Policy on Ageing, then gave an overview of the processes at the UN that are relevant to older people. In particular, she highlighted the most important milestones in international policy on ageing. The first International Plan of Action on Ageing, which was adopted in 1982 during the first World Conference on Ageing in Vienna, put the topic of ageing on the agenda of

the UN. MIPAA then replaced the Action Plan of Vienna 20 years later. At UNECE level, the Regional Implementation Strategy was developed in 2002. In 2008, the Working Group on Ageing was set up as a specific working group, which since 2019 is established as a permanent, “standing” body. The review of the implementation of MIPAA takes place every five years and should be carried out in a participatory, “bottom-up” manner. The UN published guidelines for this in 2006. Ms Voelcker presented the key points of MIPAA and emphasised that it only contains recommendations and that its implementation is therefore not legally binding for States.

In order to strengthen the human rights of older people, new bodies have been set up on the basis of various UN reports and resolutions. Of particular note here is the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG-A), which was established in 2010 and has met annually since 2011. In addition, the mandate of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons was established in 2013. This mandate is currently held by Dr Claudia Mahler, who works at the German Institute for Human Rights (DIMR) in Berlin. Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) has been increasingly addressing the human rights of older persons for several years. It has adopted several resolutions on the rights of older people.

In addition to these processes specific to older people and ageing, Ms Voelcker mentioned several UN bodies and frameworks in which civil society can represent the interests of older people. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, the UN's New Urban Agenda (NUA), which was adopted in 2016, and the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030.

Future policy will also be influenced by the UN Secretary-General's report “Our Common Agenda” published in 2021, said Ms Voelcker. The report was written at the request of Member States in connection with the UN's 75th anniversary. Central theme is strengthening solidarity between present and future generations – at national level and in the multilateral system. This solidarity should help to overcome existing multiple crises or avoid new crises and create a fairer and more sustainable world overall. In this context, a Pact for the Future will be adopted at the “Summit for the Future”, that will be held in September 2024. According to Ms Voelcker, special efforts are needed to articulate the interests of older people more effectively in this process.

## **Representing interests at the UN**

Experts who have been campaigning for the human rights of older people at the UN for many years and represent various civil society organisations there discussed about how civil society can get more involved in these processes. This included Frances Zainoeddin, who represents the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) at

the UN in New York and the NGO Committee on Ageing in New York in the Steering Group of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP). Ms Zainoeddin began by explaining the different categories of “consultative status” for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC):

- General consultative status for organisations dealing with a wide range of Council activities,
- Special consultative status for organisations that can contribute to specific areas, e.g. older persons or persons with disabilities, and
- List or roster status for all other non-governmental organisations with more limited areas of activity.

This is provided for in Article 71 of the UN Charter. Through its consultative status, a non-governmental organisation can, for example, provide expert analyses on issues that stem directly from its experience on the ground. NGOs also serve as an early warning body and can support the monitoring and implementation of international agreements. They can help to raise public awareness of relevant issues and contribute to the achievement of UN goals. NGOs with consultative status have the opportunity to make their voice heard to a global audience. They can participate in international conferences and events, submit written and oral statements, organise side events to UN conferences, enter UN premises and network and advocate with Member States.

With this status, NGOs can participate in over 200 different ECOSOC subsidiary bodies, e.g. the regional commissions such as the UNECE, functional commissions such as the Commission for Social Development (CSocD) or the UN Statistical Commission, as well as other ad hoc bodies or standing committees. These include, for example, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

While the various bodies under ECOSOC provide for the participation of civil society, the rules of procedure of the UN General Assembly do not necessarily allow for this. However, one of the important subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, which meets in Geneva, allows the participation of non-governmental organisations in its deliberations, even in informal negotiations between Member States, where NGOs with ECOSOC status are allowed to participate and contribute to the discussions. The specialised agencies of the UN, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) or the World Health Organisation (WHO), in turn, have their own procedures for the participation of civil society.

### **The participation of older persons in the discussions**

The discussion with Dr Nena Georgantzi from AGE Platform Europe, Verity McGivern from HelpAge International and Silvia Perel-Levin from the International Network for

the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) and the NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva focused specifically on the representation of older people's interests at the UN. The experts' experiences revealed the important role played by NGOs in exerting pressure on Member States. The commitment of civil society organisations has led to concrete results. Silvia Perel-Levin, for example, spoke of a resolution that led to the establishment of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD). This was initiated by INPEA. In addition, pressure from civil society organisations was decisive for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted in 2006.

The experts outlined a number of ways in which representatives of NGOs can get involved with the United Nations: e.g. via the NGO Committees on Ageing in Geneva and New York, the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing or via the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, which has a comprehensive online platform. For those interested in topics related to digitalisation, the work of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is also relevant. Overall, participation, at least in an observer role, has now been made easier, as many meetings can be followed virtually. The meetings of many civil society organisations are now also accessible digitally and in an observer role, even without membership, such as the meetings of the NGO Committee in Geneva. They would provide a good opportunity to stay informed about the various activities at the UN.

The experts further explained that not only participation at the UN itself is important, but also advocacy of civil society at national level. The experience and knowledge of national senior citizens' organisations as representative organisations indispensable at the UN as these organisations are closer to the lives of older people. Furthermore, the exchange with member organisations on certain topics provides an important basis for umbrella organisations that are drafting statements. Empowering older people to present their concerns to the UN themselves is also an important measure. While the active participation of NGOs in Geneva and New York is indispensable, according to the experts, the representation of interests in the capital cities is just as important, both at government level and in parliaments. It is not enough to influence the ministries of social affairs, family or health. The Foreign Office in particular plays an important role, as it issues directives to the Permanent Missions of Member States to the UN. Contacts with the Permanent Missions of the Member States in Geneva and New York is also important.

The interests of older people would receive more attention if other interest groups, such as those representing women or young people, would also advocate for older people and ageing. It is important to present a united voice, which in the case of strengthening the human rights of older people benefits from the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP). Under the umbrella of GAROP, hundreds of NGOs come together to campaign for the rights of older people at international,

national or local level. They work closely together to make the call for a UN convention on the rights of older persons heard at all levels.

The experts appealed to Member States and the UN to involve older people more in the discussions at the UN, both those that directly concern ageing and older people and those that deal with sustainable development or human rights issues, for example. Conversely, NGOs that deal with other issues should be sensitised to take a stronger life-course perspective and include ageing and older people in their advocacy work.

Speaking of the human rights of older persons, according to the experts, efforts should be made to take greater account of the specific life situations of older people in existing human rights instruments. Senior citizens' organisations and other representative organisations of older persons should work more closely with other NGOs to ensure that ageing and older people are also specifically mentioned in the reporting procedures for existing international human rights instruments. For example, senior citizens' organisations could ensure that the situation of older women is given greater focus in civil society's shadow reports on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The experts emphasised that a UN convention on the rights of older persons could also lead to greater attention being paid to the voices of older people. A convention would systematise existing rights for older people. This in turn would lead to universal human rights being adapted to the living situation of older people and their needs and increase the enforceability of these rights.

### **The benefits of international agreements at national level**

Reports from Moldova, Portugal, Canada and Germany illustrated how international agreements can be used at national level. In this context, it also became clear how national efforts can influence the work of the UN.

Tatiana Sorocan, Head of HelpAge Moldova, spoke about raising awareness at national level around MIPAA. In addition to the legal framework, she cited the country's active participation in the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing and the general interest in demographic change and ageing as facilitating factors. Civil society in the Republic of Moldova had organised meetings with Government representatives to provide information about MIPAA and promote its implementation. In addition, HelpAge carried out campaigns in which the concerns of older people were presented and data on the situation of older people was collected. Regular petitions on the commitments contained in MIPAA, position papers with recommendations to politicians and the formation of alliances with other civil society actors are also important methods for advancing the implementation of MIPAA in the Republic of Moldova.

While Ms Sorocan spoke about the benefits of a political instrument, the presentation by H.-Günter Heiden from Netzwerk Artikel 3 focused on a legally binding instrument: the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Mr Heiden spoke about the role of civil society in the implementation of the Convention, which has the status of a federal law in Germany. However, the Government is working with action plans to implement it. Mr Heiden believes this is not very effective as they are not laws. He criticised the fact that civil society is included, but not really involved. One way to increase the pressure at national level would be to participate in the UN state review. Here, civil society submits parallel reports to the Government's reports and participates in hearings of the relevant expert committee. In this context, the UN Committee of Experts had called on the Federal Government to revise the translation of the UN CRPD and made further specific individual recommendations. The experts evaluate these as successes that are related to the reports from civil society. Based on his experience with the disability rights movement, Mr Heiden concluded his presentation with three messages. 1. it is about the rights of older people, not their protection; 2. the mantra must be "Nothing about us without us!"; 3. unity and determination are the fundamental prerequisites for success.

The presentation by José Carreira, founder of the Portuguese initiative "Stop Ageism" (Stop Idadismo), highlighted the influence of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030 and, in particular, the Global Report on Ageism<sup>1</sup> by the World Health Organisation (WHO) at national level. Although Portugal is one of the countries with the oldest population in the world, older people continue to be heavily stigmatised, said Mr Carreira. This had spurred him on to act against the stigmatisation of older people. The WHO report provided an important basis for the establishment of the initiative and was decisive for the creation of the Ibero-American Network against Ageism 2021. Stop Idadismo is, for instance, active in schools to combat ageism. To this end, the organisation has developed various intergenerational activities. The initiative also carries out public relations work, e.g. on the radio, and specifically addresses ageism in meetings with parliamentarians.

Margaret Gillis, co-founder of the Canadian Coalition against Ageism, began by recalling the multiple violations of human rights and the increased vulnerability of older people during the coronavirus pandemic. Canada was one of the countries with particularly high mortality rates, especially in long-term care facilities. Around 80 percent of all COVID-19 deaths were recorded there, said Ms Gillis. However, ageism was also widespread before the pandemic. It is different from other forms of discrimination because it concerns a condition that affects everyone: old age. Older

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<sup>1</sup> Ageism is understood by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as follows: Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudices (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) against others or ourselves based on age. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism>, accessed on 12.01.2024)

people would develop a kind of “self-hatred”, while younger people would have prejudices against their future selves. Ageism would also overlap with other forms of discrimination, resulting in multiple discrimination. It leads to marginalisation and exclusion and has negative consequences for health. Despite data that shows, for example, that ageism has serious consequences for the economy, the problem is largely ignored, said Ms Gillis. The Canadian Government has recognised this and has therefore asked civil society to bring the issue into the public eye. Onlooking at the influence of AARP, the most important advocacy group for the 50+ population in the USA, and based on the WHO report, the Canadian Coalition was founded in spring 2023. This coalition brings together the country's most important seniors' organisations to take a decisive stand against ageism. The aim is to raise awareness and influence policy to ensure that political measures and laws take into account the human rights of older people.

### **The importance of networking across borders**

At the end of the conference, Nicole Zündorf-Hinte – standing in for Martin Amberger, Germany's national focal point for the SWGA, Dr Lisa Warth from the SWGA Secretariat at the UNECE and Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf, representing civil society in the SWGA, shared their impressions.

For Dr Warth, the discussions were important in order to give more space to the voice of older people and to exchange views on how civil society can become even more involved in the various processes. She noted that civil society in UNECE countries would need more support to bring the interests of older people into the debates.

Civil society, according to Ms Zündorf-Hinte, is united in its goal for a UN convention on the rights of older persons. While keeping this long-term goal in mind, Ms Zündorf-Hinte also recommended using existing instruments. As has been mentioned several times, human rights have no age limit. Nevertheless, there is a lot of work to be done in this area and the representation of the interests of older people must be correspondingly loud – at national, regional and international level.

According to Dr Mollenkopf, it was clear from the experts' contributions that it takes a lot of patience to get things moving at the UN. To achieve this, it is important to look for allies, build trust and establish long-term contacts. As civil society, we need to work together even more closely on this. In her concluding remarks, Dr Mollenkopf recalled the participation of civil society in the last UNECE conference on the implementation of MIPAA. As part of a survey, civil society organisations proposed topics that should be addressed in the future. These include, for example, digitalisation, humanitarian emergencies, migration, climate change and discrimination. She also believes it is important to address slow social changes that



influence the social composition of neighborhoods or families, for example. For her, these social changes are an important aspect that must be addressed in the future. These topics were included in the Joint Declaration by Civil Society and Scientific Research, with the aim of paying more attention to them in the future. The exchange with other countries and organisations is also important here. This is precisely what the follow-up events in this series are useful for, said Dr Mollenkopf.

## Glossary

Acronym	English name	German name
AARP	Formerly known as American Association of Retired Persons	US-Verband der Rentnerinnen und Rentner
BAGSO	German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations	Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Seniorenorganisationen
BMFSFJ	Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth	Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend
CSocD	Commission for Social Development	Kommission für soziale Entwicklung
DIMR	German Institute for Human Rights	Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council	Wirtschafts- und Sozialrat der Vereinten Nationen
GAROP	Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People	Globale Allianz für die Rechte älterer Menschen
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development	Hochrangiges politisches Forum für nachhaltige Entwicklung
IFA	International Federation on Ageing	Internationaler Verband zum Altern
ILO	International Labour Organisation	Internationale Arbeitsorganisation
INPEA	International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse	Internationales Netzwerk zur Prävention des Missbrauchs älterer Menschen
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	Internationale Telekommunikationsunion

MIPAA	Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing	Internationaler Aktionsplan von Madrid über das Altern (auch: Zweiter Weltaltenplan)
NUA	New Urban Agenda	Neue Urbane Agenda
OEWG-A	Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing	Offene Arbeitsgruppe zu Fragen des Alterns
RIS	Regional Implementation Strategies	Regionale Implementierungsstrategie
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals	Nachhaltigkeitsziele
SWGA	Standing Working Group on Ageing	Ständige Arbeitsgruppe zu Fragen des Alterns
UN	United Nations	Vereinte Nationen
UN-BRK	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	UN-Behindertenrechtskonvention
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe	Wirtschaftskommission für Europa der Vereinten Nationen
WEAAD	World Elder Abuse Awareness Day	Welttag zur Sensibilisierung für die Misshandlung älterer Menschen
WHO	World Health Organisation	Weltgesundheitsorganisation

## Further information on the conference

[Programme](#)

[PowerPoint slides of the speakers](#)

[Short biographies of the speakers](#)

[Explanatory video on international policy on ageing](#)

## Other additional information

- United Nations, 2002, Report of the Second World Assembly on ageing, <https://www.bmfsfj.de/resource/blob/122586/3d7ad05f599ea9984107fe40057f50a7/second-world-assembly-on-ageing-data.pdf>
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- OEWG-A, <https://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/>
- OHCHR, [OHCHR and older persons | OHCHR](#)
- Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-older-persons>
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- United Nations Human Rights Council, Resolution 48/3 on „Ageism and age discrimination“, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session48/res-dec-stat>
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- BAGSO, Better protecting the human rights in old age, 2022, [https://www.bagso.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/bagso/06\\_Veroeffentlichungen/2022/OEWG-A\\_Briefing\\_Better\\_protecting\\_the\\_human\\_rights\\_in\\_older\\_age.pdf](https://www.bagso.de/fileadmin/user_upload/bagso/06_Veroeffentlichungen/2022/OEWG-A_Briefing_Better_protecting_the_human_rights_in_older_age.pdf)
- BAGSO website on OEWG-A, <https://www.bagso.de/themen/internationale-altenpolitik/rechte-aelterer/menschenrechte-sichern/>
- GAROP, <https://rightsofolderpeople.org/garop-advocacy-tools/>
- AGE Platform Europe, <https://www.age-platform.eu/areas-of-work/age-equality/>
- NGO Committee on Ageing Geneva, <https://ageingcommitteegeneva.org/>
- NGO Committee on Ageing New York, <https://www.ngocoa-ny.org/>

- 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- 2030 Agenda and global Ageing, <https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/agenda-2030-the-sustainable-development-goals-and-global-ageing.pdf>
- New Urban Agenda (in German), 2016, <https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-German.pdf>
- Platform of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, <https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/>

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