



Event report

Daring new communities: Living solidarity in an individualised society

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

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Daring new communities: Living solidarity in an individualised society

The increasing individualisation of society is a cause for concern for many people in the UNECE region: loneliness, social fragmentation and a lack of cohesion are becoming increasingly apparent. At the same time, new forms of communities are emerging in many places, in which people support each other across generations and live together in solidarity.

In this online event, inspiring examples of successful new communities and intergenerational initiatives from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region were presented. Together, it was discussed how such initiatives can be strengthened and disseminated.

Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf, President of AGE Platform Europe, board member of BAGSO and civil society representative in the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing (SWGA), opened the event. She explained that the Ministerial Declaration adopted in Rome in 2022 to conclude the fourth review and appraisal cycle of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) forms the basis for the series of events. With this Declaration, the SWGA was tasked with updating the UNECE's Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) for MIPAA from 2002. In this context, Dr Mollenkopf emphasised the importance of participation, diversity and social cohesion in an increasingly fragmented society. She also referred to the BAGSO survey "Getting older in Germany", a contribution to the updating of RIS. The results of the survey showed that the social changes of recent years and increasing individualism are perceived as worrying. Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf then thanked the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ) for supporting the series of events

entitled 'An engaged civil society as engine for an age-friendly society: an international exchange'.

Nicole Zündorf-Hinte, Head of Division at the BMBFSFJ, emphasised the relevance of intergenerational approaches in her welcoming address and stressed that the recent expansion of the Ministry's remit to include education represented an opportunity in this respect. This is because the Ministry is now also responsible for lifelong learning. She referred to initiatives such as the "Zukunftsraum Kommunale Demografiegestaltung" and the strategy against loneliness. The Ministry promotes so-called "caring neighbourhoods" as new social infrastructures and views loneliness as a cross-generational problem. Mrs Zündorf-Hinte also emphasised that the increasing fragmentation of society affects all age groups and that new social spaces for encounters are therefore necessary. She referred to current data showing that young people are increasingly affected by loneliness. This problem must be recognised and measures and solutions developed to meet the needs of specific age cohorts.

Living solidarity – between human rights and policy

Dr Claudia Mahler, the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons of the United Nations (UN), highlighted the importance of a human rights-based approach to ageing policy. The Independent Expert explained that there are gaps in both national and international human rights protection regarding age discrimination. This makes it structurally difficult for older persons to participate in society. She called for a stronger legal framework to combat age discrimination and emphasised the intersectionality, e.g. between age and gender or age and disability. In some cases, there are age limits for receiving social benefits. People with disabilities, for example, no longer receive the benefits they were entitled to as a person with a disability in economically productive age from the age of 60 or 65 onwards, but rather those for people in old age, which are often significantly lower. Civil society must speak out clearly on this issue and make demands at international level.

Dr Mahler drew attention to Resolution 58/13 of the UN Human Rights Council adopted in April 2025, which represents a significant step towards an international agreement on the protection of the rights of older persons. The resolution provides for the establishment of an intergovernmental working group to draft the text of an internationally legally binding instrument to protect the human rights of older people. Such a convention on the rights of older persons will codify the rights with a specific focus on the concerns of older persons, just as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both Conventions tailor the rights specifically for people with disabilities and children respectively, according to Dr Mahler. The intergovernmental working group is to meet twice a year from 2026. The Independent Expert emphasised how important it is for

older persons to be involved, as only they know what is needed, what is missing and where implementation is inadequate. As Independent Expert, her responsibilities include raising awareness of existing challenges faced by older people in realising their human rights. The mandate also provides for raising awareness of older persons' contributions to society and informing them about their human rights.

The Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva, Dr Alejandro Bonilla-Garcia, spoke about the importance of intergenerational solidarity in connection with social security systems. He discussed the historical shift from collective risk-sharing with social insurance systems to the individualised assumption of risks. For him, this change is much more than a system change. Rather, it was a paradigm shift characterised by the rise of individualism and the decline of risk-sharing, which represented the rupture of the intergenerational contract. Dr Bonilla-Garcia called for a return to intergenerational solidarity and cited education, international standards and civil society engagement as levers for a fairer society. Solidarity between generations is not only fair, but also keeps society viable, sustainable and united. It also makes economic and financial sense. Solidarity and risk-sharing through social insurance must be a cornerstone of sustainable social and economic development.

The upcoming work of the intergovernmental working group of the UN Human Rights Council is an important opportunity to strengthen solidarity between generations. The NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva will work closely with the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) to ensure that older persons and their representative organisations are involved in the drafting of the UN convention on the human rights of older persons. Interested organisations can contact the NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva, whose members represent the interests of older persons in various UN processes.

International examples of intergenerational practices

Following the introductory structuring presentations, initiatives from three countries in the UNECE region were presented and discussed. These examples from member organisations of AGE Platform Europe, the European umbrella organisation of senior citizens' organisations, showed how intergenerational cohesion can be strengthened and what role the fight against ageism plays in this context.

Alice Latta reported on the work of Entr'âges, a Belgian association that campaigns against age discrimination and ageism and in favour of intergenerational solidarity. She presented their work to initiate and support a nationwide campaign, the "Intergenerational Week". Any organisation that mobilises citizens of different generations through cultural, artistic, sporting or educational activities can take part in this campaign. Entr'âges accompanies the actions

with a communication campaign and creates an overview of all activities on a website. The aim of the activities is to bring people of different age groups together.

In this context, Mrs Latta emphasised how important it is to tackle stereotypes in a targeted manner. Intergenerational encounters must be actively organised to facilitate sustainable connections and counteract ageism. According to Mrs Latta, it is particularly important for intergenerational activities to elaborate common points and for the different generations to take on roles that they do not normally take on. In today's world, for example, migration and experiences of being a refugee and living in conflict areas can also connect generations.

From Greece, Liana Kokkolia spoke about the work of her organisation, ANTAMA. The aim of ANTAMA is to bring people together to discuss ageism and loneliness, create social connections and improve the quality of life of older persons. Liana Kokkolia highlighted two initiatives: intergenerational walks and workshops against ageism in the workplace. The great demand for intergenerational walks has shown that people have a need to connect with each other. According to Mrs Kokkolia, no resources are required to organise such walks. The walks are organised in cooperation with various partners, such as the Greek Society of Geriatrics and the Ministry for Sport and Education, with almost 100 participants from toddlerhood to old age. The walks are sometimes combined with a joint lunch, or a workshop following the walk and take place, for example, on the European Day of Generations.

The art workshop against ageism in the workplace was organised at the request of Baiersdorf. Firstly, the participants were asked for a self-assessment on the topic of ageism based on a questionnaire. The employees then discussed the question of how ageism manifests itself in the workplace. The discussion, which was linked to a presentation, also focussed on what can be done to reduce or counteract ageism. Afterwards, the employees created various clay works on the theme of "Four Seasons" in intergenerational workshops. Mrs Kokkolia reported that most of the participants had never worked with clay before and how amazing it was to see the results. The feedback from the participants showed that they were grateful for the creation of a space for dialogue between different generations.

Anne Berit Rafoss presented the work of the Centre for an Age-Friendly Norway and some practical local initiatives. The Centre has a large national network of around 250 members and is part of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities. It is committed to the implementation of age-friendly policies and practices. Intersectorality, sustainability and inclusion are important principles of the Centre's work. Mrs Rafoss highlighted the "Generation Games" as a nationwide, low-threshold and intergenerational sports and meeting initiative. Each team consists of at least two generations. Mind sports such as chess or quizzes are also part of the Generation Games. The main aim is to ensure that the activities are accessible to everyone. This year there are over

70 events throughout Norway. In the town of Tonnes alone, which has a population of 38,000, 4,000 people have taken part in the Games. The Generation Games also make an important contribution to cultural diversity, says Mrs Rafoss. As one does not necessarily have to communicate verbally, the activities are also inviting for people whose mother tongue is not Norwegian.

In conclusion, Anne Berit Rafoss emphasised that many of the activities can be carried out with limited resources and that co-creation with citizens is key to success. It is important to create spaces for different generations to come together at a local level.

What connects us: Generations in dialogue

The final dialogue between Moira Allan (Old'Up, France) and Neža Repanšek (youth representative at the European Economic and Social Committee, EESC) focused on individual experiences of intergenerational solidarity and the associated structural challenges. Mrs Allan began by talking about her personal experience of sharing her flat with a younger flatmate. She very much appreciated the opportunity to live with a woman from another generation. Mrs Repanšek emphasised that younger and older generations often have similar problems and challenges to overcome and how important dialogue between the generations is. In her eyes, this is not a luxury, but a necessity.

The further exchange centred on a European project involving 15 countries. The project, which involved Old'Up and the European Youth Forum, aimed to mobilise people to take part in the EU Parliament elections. Youth and senior citizens' organisations worked together to strengthen democracy in Europe. In doing so, the similarities, especially the common goal, came to the fore and the age difference receded into the background. The same applies to the joint commitment to climate protection, e.g. through movements such as Fridays for Future and Parents / Grannies for Future, or around housing shortages or the rising cost of living, as Mrs Repanšek highlighted.

According to the speakers, a key factor in reducing ageism is recognising that it is possible to both learn and teach at any age. Ageism needs to be tackled at a very early age by teaching children that ageing is an integral part of life.

Conclusion and outlook

The event showed that solidarity between the generations can be initiated locally, promoted politically and conceptualised as an international network. Various examples were used to illustrate that low-threshold, participative formats and targeted measures against ageism are effective. In her concluding remarks, Dr Mollenkopf said that the event encouraged people to

dare to create new communities and to take concrete steps towards greater cohesion in a pluralistic society.

Dr Lisa Warth from UNECE briefed participants about the next steps in updating the Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and encouraged participants to find out at national level how they can get involved. National focal points on ageing for UNECE have until the end of July to gather information and submit it to UNECE. The contributions from the countries will then be analysed by UNECE to inform the revision of the strategy in a next step. The Secretariat of the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing is available to answer any questions related to this process.

In the upcoming online event in this series, there will be an update on the revision of the Regional Implementation Strategy of the MIPAA. By then, further information on the intergovernmental working group of the UN Human Rights Council and the opportunities for civil society to participate in the drafting of a UN convention on the human rights of older persons will likely also be available.

More information

To keep up to date with events and activities of the Standing Working Group on Ageing and the Population Unit at UNECE, subscribe to this mailing list:

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

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