

OPENING REMARKS

Sylvia Beales

HelpAge International

February 3, 2010

Honourable Ambassadors, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I am really honoured to be here today, to moderate such a distinguished panel on such an important and ground breaking subject; empowerment and human rights. For those of you who were able to be here yesterday I am privileged to welcome you back to what promises to be another excellent session; for those of you just joining I know you will find this space for exchange and dialogue stimulating and thought provoking.

I wanted to share a few words about my organisation, help Age International. We are a global network of 80 national affiliates, and ARE PROUD to work in close association with the United Nations and our friends within the range of international networks on ageing, many of whom are here today. Our network affiliates are the heartbeat of help Age; they work tirelessly to promote advocacy and programmes in support of older people in over 60 countries, and set the tone and example for the work we do to promote the rights and secure the well being and security of older women and men in the developing world. Their priorities set our programme; which is designed around the themes of social protection, health, rights, support for care-giving, to be included and to contribute.

AARP is our long standing, distinguished national affiliate in the US; and we are also so pleased to welcome today the Executive director of one of our most recent affiliates, Help Age USA, Marilyn Grist.

Together AARP and HelpAge USA are doing a fantastic job of raising funds and raising the profile of older people in Haiti. As we heard yesterday the million dollar mark has been passed; this engagement is really important to ensuring that issues of older people in Haiti are not lost. On our side we are putting the programmes in place to ensure older people are found, can get the supplies that are rightfully theirs, that their needs are catered for, however frail and vulnerable they may be. Funds will be used to support immediate aid for six months from the

date of the disaster and longer-term support to older victims 18 months following. For now, funds are needed to purchase food, clothing, water, plastic sheeting for shelters; hygiene packs (with essential items like soap, detergent, toothpaste) and buckets to carry and distribute water.

We have a team of six people, who arrived shortly after January 12th, working with local partners to identify and support older people with hygiene and essential supply kits, shelter, medical attention and psychosocial support. We know that many of those affected are carers for children, and they are desperately looking for ways to support them. Our team is also working with others to ensure that relief given from the big agencies does not inadvertently exclude older people. The example given yesterday of supplies being inaccessible to the older man because they are being distributed from a hill simply should not happen - and we will do our best to make sure it doesn't. We have set up vulnerability supply points and are working with a range of agencies, government and NGO to find, support and give some relief to older people – and to help them get back on their feet so they too can contribute and support the reconstruction of their country.

That said, back to the panel. Barry Rand, CEO of AARP uses the word 'transformational' to describe the older person agenda. I couldn't agree more. Action on ageing and action to secure the rights and empowerment of older people throughout the world will transform not only the lives of older people but those that depend on them, and those on whom they depend. One example is our recent work on climate change – conversations with older people in places as diverse as Bolivia, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan are demonstrating that older people have knowledge and practice that could transform lives far beyond their own if their experience and opinion is brought to the policy making table. That the world is getting older is not in doubt. But the realisation that the transformational process of global ageing could, with appropriate policies and investment, go hand in hand with fairer, more equitable and more decent social and economic arrangements has not yet taken place,

This is our challenge and our goal. This is also why the topic of this panel is so important. While human rights can be considered aspirational, their pursuit, and that of norms and practices for implementation, and their protection continues to change our imperfect world for the better. Adherence to rights challenges us to think differently, act more justly and be aware of accountability and responsibility to our fellow citizens. For example, as we will hear from our key note speaker, the pursuit of the right to economic security in old age delivers a range of immediate and long term benefits to individuals and societies and is a key driver in the fight against poverty. So what is holding us back?

Empowerment is a core issue for us as we age. Why? Because age seems to bring the danger of vulnerability, exclusion and discrimination. Our work across the world with our affiliates and partners underlines the importance of voice, of participation, of agency in older age. In your pack you will find a video of older peoples experiences in the global campaign Age Demands Action. Though the organisation and agency of older people on and around older peoples day in October national policies are changing, social pensions are happening, health access is improving, constitutions are being amended to include issues o ageing, dialogue is taking place between the people and those in government on abuses suffered in old age.

Today the Commission for social Development opened its deliberations on social groups, including older people. As we know there is a comprehensive plan of action on ageing which, if implemented would transform our world. But it's also the case that action on ageing is still a little bit out of focus for many players. But let's agree that by acting together - the people, the UN and the member states in the commission – response to ageing can happen, and that the 10 year anniversary of the Madrid plan can be forward looking not only mired in recrimination about what did not happen.

To help us understand these processes and what we might do together our panel will share with us their experience and insight. In the first place I am privileged to introduce to you Magdalena Sepulveda Carmona, who is the independent expert on human rights and extreme poverty.