

**2008 AARP-UN Briefing Series on Global Aging
*Opportunities and Challenges for an Aging World***

**United Nations Headquarters
New York, NY, USA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the occasion of the 2008 session of the UN Commission on Social Development, AARP International, in collaboration with the United Nations Programme on Ageing, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, again sponsored a series of briefings on recent developments and trends in Global Aging. The briefings were held February 2008, at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The discussion focused on three main topics encompassing a wide variety of trends, data, and opinion. The three main topics addressed were the following:

- What are the determinants of health at older ages?
- What role does employment play for older persons?
- How can human rights be incorporated into the aging agenda?

The five-year review of the Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing (MIPAA) was conducted last year, and now the time has come for governments to move forward from debating the numbers to translating the objectives and recommendations of the Madrid Plan into national policies and practices. The “bottom-up” approach -- as the methodology for monitoring the implementation of the Madrid Plan is called -- will be possible only if older persons themselves are involved in the implementation process and partnerships are formed between governments and businesses, foundations, professional and civic organizations, the academic sector, and other non-governmental organizations.

A major theme of this year’s briefing series was the need for people of all ages to understand that healthy aging is a life-long endeavor which brings dividends to societies, and that aging issues affect all members of society.

The demographic reality underlying the focus on aging issues is that populations throughout the world are aging. Median ages in the developed world are already more than 40 years, and they are even higher in a few European countries. Populations in developed countries are older than those in developing countries, but the majority of older persons now live in developing countries, and this trend will continue to intensify. Projections show that even in African countries with very young populations today, the median age will rise in decades to come. Projections for 2050 show that about 80 percent of the world’s two billion persons aged 60 or over will be living in developing countries.

Three panels of experts addressed the main topics and presented a wealth of new information and scientific evidence on current trends as well as challenges for future action.

Issue 1: The determinants of health at older ages

In the area of health, speakers examined such issues as the social and economic determinants of health over the life course and how these determinants influence the well-being of persons as they age. Emphasis was placed on public policy interventions, including health promotion, prevention and the creation of an enabling environment, which result in better health, independence, and the continued participation of all members of society as they age. Speakers presented examples of interventions that have already provided positive results in both developed and developing countries.

In all countries of the world, aging is an uneven process, affecting those in lower socio-economic situations more severely and at earlier ages than those who are more affluent. In the occupational hierarchy, those at higher levels (professional and managerial) have lower mortality rates and longer life expectancy than those at lower levels (manual and unskilled workers). In addition, those with higher educational attainment are more likely to delay the aging process. This social gradient is not necessarily caused by poverty or by lack of access to health care, and there is nothing inevitable about the scale of health inequity between countries and within countries. It is most often due to the circumstances, in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. It exists because of political priorities, inadequate social protection policies, and unfair economic arrangements. Action to improve and promote health equity more often takes action outside the health sector. The solutions lie in empowering individuals, communities and countries and in strengthening social policies so that they protect individuals against disadvantages over which they have no control.

Finland was presented as a case study of effective social protection across the life course. Three basic elements of Finland's program are prevention, services and social insurance. Benefits are universal, and they are financed by the central government, municipalities as well as by employers and workers. Gender equality is firmly incorporated into everyday life. Finland's competitive economy and leadership in information technology development show that providing social security for all has not endangered economic growth. Government policy has attempted to make work attractive for older persons, and the employment rate for older workers has risen faster than that of any other country in the European Union. Pension reforms allow flexibility in retirement age, and efforts are underway to improve the quality of working conditions for older persons. The elements in Finland's successful management of an aging society include crisis awareness, a consistent national-level strategy, an inter-sectoral approach, health in all policies, research and development, innovation, and pension reform.

A concern for all people in society should include advocacy for issues affecting older persons but not only the older generation. Only leadership and political will can result in a society that protects all of its citizens, and it takes the voices of the young and the old to draw attention to the rights, health, care, and dignity of older people. Just as the issue of climate change has recently become a priority on many national agendas, so should the issue of aging gain urgency and relevance to governments worldwide.

Issue 2: Employment and the Opportunities of Aging.

In the area of employment and retirement policies, the session examined current trends regarding older workers' participation in the labor market in both OECD and in developing countries. Among the issues addressed were retirement-age policies, particularly in populations that have been benefiting from steady improvements in health status and longevity. The question was asked as to what extent do current retirement age policies increase the future financial burden of old-age pension systems, perpetuate age discrimination or can even be seen as obstacles to labor force participation of older persons.

In developing countries, coverage by social security and social protection schemes is still considered as inadequate as many jobs are in the informal sector of the economy. How can the coverage gap be improved or eliminated? Are there public policy innovations, such as universal pensions, that address the particular vulnerability of women and older workers in the labor market? Speakers from the OECD, ILO and the UN were invited to address these topics by presenting examples of recent policy changes intended to ensure better economic security for older persons in both developed and developing countries.

There was general agreement that a key policy response to the challenge of an aging labor force should be to recognize that living longer means working longer. If there is no change in policy, and if retirement behavior does not change, many countries will face an enormous rise in the number of retirees relative to the work force. Some countries may see a doubling of the ratio of retirees per worker. A study of aging and employment policies in 21 OECD countries identified work disincentives and barriers to the employment of older people. It found that a government response is only one factor in meeting the challenge; employers, trade unions and non-governmental organizations also have important roles to play.

Policy responses should include making work more attractive and rewarding for older workers; preventing employers from practicing age discrimination; and offering training to older workers to help them maintain their skills and learn new skills. Pension reforms have already resulted in an increase in retirement age between 1996 and 2006 in many OECD countries.

Another theme in the session on older workers focused on the importance of universal pensions, not just as an income support for older persons but also as a tool in national anti-poverty and development strategies. Many studies have found that income from social transfers helps all members of the household, lifting them out of poverty and enabling children to be healthier and more likely to be enrolled in school. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has studied the affordability of social pensions and concluded that nearly all developing countries could finance a basic package of benefits for less than five percent of GDP.

The employment of older workers in the UN/ESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) Region highlighted the situation of countries undergoing extremely rapid aging. Today's developed countries have been aging over a very long period of time. It took more than a hundred years in France, for example, for the older population (65 and over) to increase from 7 to 14 percent of the total population. In China, however, this change will take only 26 years. Asian workers, both male and female, are more likely to stay in the labor force into old age because many are in the informal labor sector and lack any kind of pension coverage. Except for Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore, formal social security schemes or pensions in Asian countries cover only about 9 to 20 percent of workers. The situation for older women in Asia is even worse: they are more financially dependent and vulnerable than men; they have fewer assets and benefits than men; and at older ages they are more likely to live with their adult children.

Issue 3: Human rights and the participation of older persons.

In the area of human rights and the participation of older persons, speakers examined the important roles that older persons play in all societies by contributing to economic and social progress. Their contributions may however be undermined by current developments such as migration, urbanization and environmental threats. What measures can be taken to not only protect the human rights of older persons but also to foster their continuing contribution to the economy and the community as active participants in the development process? Speakers provided current examples of successful policies that have demonstrated the dividends to be derived from protecting the rights of older people.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the right to income security in old age, but many older people must continue working because they have no alternative. It is not sufficient to say that human rights are moral and political claims made on the basis of our common humanity. The promotion of human rights requires advocacy and partnerships to ensure social inclusion and the full participation of older persons in society. The Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing incorporates the human rights dimension into its objectives, and the United Nations provides a legitimate ground for converting its aspirations into specific policy goals.

Recent developments in the UN/ECLAC (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) Region focused on the human rights dimension. The main conclusion of the 31st session of UN/ECLAC in March 2006 was that the rights-based approach should be used in framing public policy. This approach modifies the logic on which laws, policies, and programs are designed, and the individual with needs becomes a person with human rights. The approach says that all social groups and persons should be treated on an equal basis with respect and dignity; that special provisions should be made for vulnerable or socially excluded individuals and groups, such as women, children, indigenous people, the disabled, and older persons; and that the human rights of all individuals are independent of their differences and social position in society. In the UN/ECLAC region, some countries have introduced legislation to protect the rights of older persons, but these laws have limited effectiveness because of difficulties in accessing information; scarcity of funds for enforcement, lack of mechanisms to ensure participation and the lack of empowerment of older persons.

Progress in healthy aging is being made, but success is uneven across the world and particularly in terms of socio-economic class. There is a need to reduce inequalities in survival and in quality of the life that are amenable to practical policies and interventions. Healthy aging requires a commitment to life-long health promotion and risk prevention. Practical health policies can make an enormous difference to the quality of life of people at older ages. The global health agenda needs to shift from the sole focus on infectious diseases and young children toward a focus on chronic diseases and aging. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not make specific reference to aging, but it would be possible to add an indicator that would encompass healthy aging as an example of the success of health and development efforts.

In summing up, the words of Dr. Nitin Desai, former UN Under-Secretary General for Social and Economic Affairs, were recalled on the need for nuance in aging policy. Dr. Desai wrote: "The new architecture of aging requires policies that remove obstacles and facilitate contributions. It also requires seminal thinking and images that reflect reality and potential, not stereotypes and myths. So relative are the experiences of aging in different parts of the world, and so complex and multiple their roles, that the world can no longer accept images of aging as a panorama of near homogeneity."

For more detailed information about the conference and the presentations, please visit:
www.aarpinternational.org/2008UNBriefingSeries