

The UN at 75: An Opportunity to Build an Age-Friendly Future

<https://doi.org/10.26419/int.00045.006>

By Fabrizio Hochschild

The United Nations (UN) turns 75 this year. To mark this anniversary, Secretary-General António Guterres has launched a global conversation on the major trends that are shaping our future, and how international cooperation can be reinvigorated to better manage them.

One of these trends is population aging. When the UN was founded in 1945, the global average life expectancy for someone born that year was under 50 years. Today, that figure has climbed to 72, according to the World Bank, and is projected to reach 77 by 2050.

Older people are now the world's fastest-growing age group. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) expects that over the next three decades, the number of people ages 65 and older will reach 1.5 billion — more than twice what it is today. The number of people over age 80 is growing even faster. It has almost tripled since 1990 and will do so again by 2050.

These trends reflect some of the UN's successes over the past 75 years, including transformations in areas such as health and education, that have resulted in people living longer and healthier lives although it is also important to understand these gains have not been evenly spread between and within countries. Nevertheless, in spite of such disparities, we now have an unprecedented chance to unlock the wisdom and capacities of older people, as more people are able to contribute to their societies and economies later in life.

But there are challenges too. For instance, the so-called support ratio — the number of people of working age (defined by DESA as 25 to 64) relative to those age 65 or older — is decreasing in many parts of the world. By 2050, nearly 50 countries, mainly in Europe, North America, and East and Southeast Asia, are expected to have ratios below 2 — that is, less than two persons of working age for every person age 65 and older — resulting in challenging knock-on effects for both public services and the labor market.

Population aging is a major demographic shift that will have far-reaching implications for how we live, learn, work, and interact. Managing this transition will require a concerted response — at the local, national, and international levels — to

ensure we have the necessary policies and systems in place.

Ever-present across Global Issues

Yet aging rarely receives the attention that other pressing challenges do. On the one hand, this is understandable. The climate crisis is existential, while extremist attacks and new forms of violence, such as cyberattacks, attract more headlines. More recently, COVID-19 has put health at the forefront of people's minds. Against this backdrop, changes in our population's age makeup can feel less urgent.

Notably, however, aging intersects with these other trends shaping our future. For instance, HelpAge International has pointed to a growing body of evidence on the specific risks that climate change poses to older people. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that exposure to heat extremes alone could cause an additional 38,000 deaths among older people by the year 2030.

At present, two-thirds of people ages 60 and older live in low- or middle-income countries; that proportion is predicted to rise, as is the incidence of disasters in those states. These countries are likely to bear the brunt of climate change-related health impacts, and within them, older people are at greater risk because they are more susceptible to disease. They are also less able to manage through disruptions in food, water, and medical supplies as a result of climate change, conflict, pandemics, or natural disasters.

Impacts take many forms. In crises, frail people of any age find it harder to flee from harm or travel long distances to access humanitarian supplies. Those who do leave can find it harder to adjust and more challenging to find means of support in new environments. The UN Refugee Agency classifies older displaced people as among those most at risk as they are more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and abuse. They are also often less visible in humanitarian planning processes, due to a focus on younger age groups, as well as the lack of disaggregated data — another issue unto itself.

Incomplete data on older persons is impeding planning in other contexts. It has been repeatedly identified as a challenge to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 10 on reducing inequalities. According to DESA, the risk of poverty increases with age in most countries and is particularly acute in those where social protection systems are inadequate.

At present, some 4 billion people — more than half of the world's population — are not covered by any social protection benefit. Women are disproportionately affected, as they are less likely than men to participate in paid employment and, if they have been a part of the workforce, they are more likely to spend time away from paid employment and typically earn less than men — all resulting in lower contributions to pension schemes and other retirement savings.

In 2015, research from Standard & Poor's found that overwhelming majorities of the public in some of the largest cities in the world do not think their governments and employers have allocated sufficient resources to pension and health care programs. This is worrying, given that urbanization, like aging, is an inexorable trend. Until 2009, more people lived in rural areas than urban areas. Today, about 50 percent of the world's population lives in towns and cities. That number is expected to rise to 70 percent by 2050, with much of this growth taking place in Asia and Africa. According to WHO, the share of older people living in towns and cities will multiply by 16 times within a 52-year period dating back to the late 1990s, from about 56 million in 1998 to over 900 million by 2050, when they are expected to make up a quarter of the total urban population in less-developed countries.

Anniversary Marks Opportunity

As we seek to manage these trends, ensuring that the rights, needs, and voices of older people are integrated into policies and programming will be crucial to our success — not only to meet the SDGs' call to leave no one behind, but also to harness the human capital of this rapidly growing age bracket.

The UN's 75th anniversary initiative can serve to shine a spotlight on population aging. By encouraging inclusive dialogue, the UN hopes to highlight the interconnected nature of the challenges we face and promote intergenerational engagement on solutions. Through its one-minute survey — available at www.un75.online — the UN hopes to bring as many voices as possible, of all ages, to the attention of world leaders. And by working with partners such as AARP, the UN hopes to change the conversation on older people.

No question, a conversation shift is already in order. From affluent communities to refugee camps, older people already play crucial roles in our societies and economies. For instance, a 65-year-old woman today could find herself juggling employment and community work with caring for her grandchildren and her parents. And we must not forget that although older people can be among the most vulnerable and marginalized, many hold immense power and influence. Seven of the world's 10 richest people are over age 60. So too are the leaders of seven of the 10 largest economies.

With more and more people staying active into their 80s and beyond, we need to change how we think about older people and adapt our education, labor, and social policies accordingly. If we can seize the opportunity provided by the UN's 75th anniversary, our future will be bright, as well as gray. ●



Fabrizio Hochschild
Under-Secretary-General
and Special Adviser on
Preparations for the
Commemoration of the
UN's 75th Anniversary