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## **An Interview with Former AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins**

As CEO, Jo Ann expanded AARP's position as a leader on global aging issues. She traveled to Europe, Asia and Africa to meet with local and national government leaders; confer with civil society partners and leaders of aging organizations; and visit agencies serving older adults to learn how they support their older populations and to share what we have learned in the U.S. She worked to influence international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to encourage them to push countries to support the needs of aging populations. Her efforts earned her a spot on Fortune's list of the "World's 50 Greatest Leaders," and she was recognized by the WHO as one of the "Healthy Ageing 50" — those who have led the effort to support the UN's Decade of Healthy Ageing.



# An Interview with Former AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins

We are grateful to Jo Ann Jenkins for a decade of wise leadership as AARP made aging better in America and around the world. Before she stepped down in late 2024, AARP International took the opportunity to capture her personal highlights and pivotal moments during her tenure through the following interview.

**AARP** You have been a leader at AARP for more than 15 years, and the CEO for 10 years. A lot has changed in the world — and at AARP — during that time. What are some of your proudest accomplishments here?

**Jo Ann Jenkins** When I became CEO of AARP, I wanted to change the conversation around what it means to grow older. I realized that many of the programs and policies put in place to help people age better no longer met the needs of how people are aging today. We had to challenge outdated attitudes and stereotypes and spark new solutions to help people live better as they age. In other words, we had to “Disrupt Aging.”

I wrote a book entitled, *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path To Living Your Best Life at Every Age*. The book became a national best-seller and won a Nautilus Book Award for its contribution to bringing about social change. It was also translated into Korean and two dialects of Chinese.

We focused on three areas — what I call health, wealth, and self. As a result of our efforts, more people are embracing age as a period of continued growth and finding purpose in their lives. Instead of seeing dependent retirees, we’re beginning to see a new type of experienced, accomplished workforce. Instead of seeing costs, we’re witnessing an exploding consumer market that is bolstering our economy. And, instead of seeing a growing pool of dependents, we’re seeing the growth of intergenerational communities with new and different strengths.

I was also proud of what the organization did to serve as a wise friend and fierce defender of older adults by supporting lower prescription prices and defending the Affordable Care Act, and of how AARP was a strong voice during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to elevate and drive the conversation on global aging, which will be a defining issue in the decades ahead.

**AARP** Our founder, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, once declared “What we do, we do for all,” and she had a global vision, which you clearly share. Although AARP is very focused on the 50-plus population in the United States, we have worked to support older adults around the world since the earliest years of our founding. Why is it important for AARP to engage globally?

**JAJ** Population aging is a global phenomenon. Dr. Andrus recognized this when she started AARP in 1958. She wanted members to see that the aging population around the world had the same concerns as their counterparts in the United States. By 1963, she had launched the Association for Retired Persons International (ARPI), an international membership organization, complete with its own magazine. Even though ARPI proved to be an idea ahead of its time, it put AARP on a continual path of international involvement in aging issues that continues to this day.

What Dr. Andrus recognized then — and it’s even more apparent today — is that global aging is about much more than demographics. Advances in research and technology are driving innovation in virtually every field that affects our ability to live well as we age. Science is making longer lives possible — and we are beginning to see the impact of that on societies throughout the world.

As people get older, they share many of the same wants and needs, regardless of where they live. They want good health and financial security. And they want options for living their lives. They want to be included in and contribute to their societies and to be able to enjoy the opportunities that life has to offer.

We believe that we can learn a lot from the experiences of other countries, and they can learn from our experience as well. That’s why engaging globally is so important. Think of Japan. Today, Japan is the only country in the world where those age 60-plus represent 30 percent or more of the population. By 2050, 62 countries will reach that milestone, and 31 countries, including China, will have an older population than today’s Japan. And it’s not just more older people; it’s healthier people living longer lives.

The research we have spearheaded through our series of Aging Readiness and Competitiveness

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(ARC) Reports clearly shows that many countries are not prepared for their aging populations, and their level of preparedness is not consistent among competing needs. Some, for example, are addressing their long-term care needs, but are not investing in housing solutions. Others are creating solutions to help people stay connected and avoid social isolation but lack effective policies to address the needs of older workers. And this varies widely among developed and developing countries, large and small countries, and countries with diverse populations.

This makes the sharing of information among aging nations and organizations vital. It helps us understand what works and what doesn't work, and which policies are effective and which ones aren't across different societies and situations.

**AARP** As technology and globalization have made the world more interconnected (and seemingly smaller), are you seeing a rising need for AARP to speak up on behalf of older adults everywhere? What do you see as some of the greatest global challenges and how can AARP be part of the solution?

**JAJ** I think one of the biggest challenges we face — as individual consumers, as organizations and as a society — is keeping up with and integrating

new technologies into our lives. We have to recognize that as fast as the world is changing now, this is as slow as it's ever going to be.

We need to seize the opportunities that technological innovation offers to help us all live better as we age. But while technological innovation has great potential, it also carries significant risks such as age discrimination, perpetuating fraud and scams, and using data to deny people health care.

At AARP, we're advocating for policies to ensure that as new technologies such as AI are introduced, they are fair, reliable and accurate; transparent to users; accountable for adverse outcomes; and that the degree of government regulation is commensurate with the potential risk of harm to individuals.

This is especially critical in lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Our research shows that by 2050, an astonishing 80 percent of the world's 65-plus population will be living in LMICs. Additionally, 85 percent of the growth of the 65-plus population will occur in these countries between now and 2050. This signifies a significant shift in the aging demographics of these countries. At AARP, we're working to understand how countries are beginning to plan for this long-term, but inevitable, demographic shift that is occurring throughout the world, including Africa.

**Our message to business leaders was that increased longevity and the aging of the population significantly impacts the global economy and is shaping the workforce of the future. It's creating a new, vibrant "Longevity Economy" that is fast-growing, diverse, powerful and profitable — and it cuts across every sector of the economy from health, finance, housing and transportation to travel, transportation and entertainment and more.**

**AARP** Many NGOs work almost exclusively with policymakers and other civil society actors. Under your leadership, you have been a champion for engaging the private sector to help ensure prosperous and productive futures for older adults. Can you talk about the opportunity you saw with the private sector and perhaps reflect on how we might do more?

**JAJ** I saw the private sector as a critical player in helping people live better as they age. To a large extent, they had not been engaged in finding solutions. We needed to change that. That opportunity came when we began to develop the business case for creating a multigenerational workforce and tied it to our research on what we called the "Longevity Economy." We made the case that global aging is a key driver of economic growth, innovation and value creation, and most business leaders were missing out on it.

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We backed this up with research that found that older people will account for nearly 60 cents of every dollar spent globally by 2050 — a contribution valued at \$96 trillion. We also found that over 1 billion jobs in the world are held by people 50-plus, which is 32.5 percent of all employment (in 2020). By 2050, 38 percent of all jobs will be held by this population, which will be roughly 1.5 billion jobs. According to OECD calculations, giving older workers the best opportunities to work would raise GDP per person across the OECD by 19 percent over the next 30 years.

The message was clear. Older employees represent a readily available source of talent. Employers who take the right steps can leverage the multigenerational workforce as a competitive advantage — and a growing consumer market.

Our research showed that many employers were beginning to see that. In a survey of over 1,700 global companies, AARP found that 86



A Special Conversation with Ambassador Susan Rice during the AARP Global Thought Leadership Conference, 2023.

percent of global business leaders identify a multigenerational workforce as valuable to their organization's success and growth. Yet, more than half of the global executives we surveyed do not include age in their diversity and inclusion policies. So, it's clear there is much more work to be done to embrace an age-diverse workforce.

We addressed this problem by working with the OECD and the World Economic Forum (WEF) to launch the Living, Learning, and Earning Longer (LLEL) Collaborative in 2019 to identify and share best practices and economic incentives for building, supporting and sustaining a multigenerational workforce in this age of increased longevity. Through regional discussions, research and conversations with executives at companies around the world, we are identifying standards, policies and practices that reflect an age-diverse and inclusive workforce. The LLEL Collaborative currently has more than 100 companies, representing over 4 million employees and more than \$2 trillion in revenue.

When the United Nations proclaimed 2021-2030 the "Decade of Healthy Ageing," we realized that the private sector played a critical role in

closing the gap between lifespan (the number of years we live) and health span (the number of years of healthy, productive life). So, as we developed our approach to increasing healthy longevity, we built on the success of the LLEL Collaborative, to engage the private sector on solutions for healthy longevity, both as employers and as providers of products and services.

We also work with the private sector to help people maintain and improve their brain health as they age. Through the AARP Brain Health Fund, we have invested \$60 million in the Dementia Discovery Fund, which in turn invests in research and development to identify cutting-edge therapeutic approaches that could lead to effective treatments and ultimately a cure for Alzheimer's and other types of dementia.

We have created the Global Council on Brain Health to bring together scientists, doctors, scholars and policy experts around the world to debate the latest in brain health science to reach consensus on what works and what doesn't and to translate critical scientific information on brain health into simple actions people can take every day to help stay sharp throughout their lives.

**Our international activities continue to focus on key issues pertaining to health and financial security, livable communities and helping people 50-plus choose how they live as they age. In 2012, in affiliation with the World Health Organization, we launched the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities to educate, promote, and recognize improvements that make cities, towns, and counties more age-friendly for their residents.**

The key to helping people take advantage of generally longer and healthier lives in the coming years and decades is innovation. This is an area where we see perhaps the greatest opportunity for private sector involvement. We created AARP Innovation Labs to help shape the future of aging, promote healthy aging, support family caregivers, and help older Americans build financial resilience and combat social isolation.

**AARP** The world is a big place and there is a limit to how much reach one organization can achieve globally, and yet AARP has been remarkably effective at influencing several large global institutions — like the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the OECD, and the multilateral development banks. How has AARP been so successful in influencing these organizations and was this approach part of an intentional strategic design?

**JAJ** This goes back to AARP's early years. In the early 1970s, AARP Executive Director Bernie Nash sent representatives abroad to meet with

heads of non-governmental aging organizations (NGOs) in other countries to identify leadership opportunities. It soon became apparent that NGOs wanted some international representation so they could be heard in international forums, such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe, which were becoming interested in global population aging. They also wanted to learn more about each other's programs and policies. At that time, AARP made a strategic decision to work with international organizations to bring a more integrated approach to global aging issues.

As a result, the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) was born in late 1973 with Bernie becoming its first president. The IFA today is a federation of some 150 member organizations (mainly national NGOs) representing or serving older persons. In 1982, IFA was instrumental in convening the first UN World Assembly on Ageing, which produced the world's first International Plan of Action on Ageing. IFA had started advocating for such a conference within months of its launch in 1973.





With the Honorable Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, President of the United Nations' 74th General Assembly, during the 13th annual AARP-UN Briefing Series, 2020.

In 1985, AARP joined the United Nations NGO Committee on Aging to promote consideration of aging issues in the UN and appointed its first representative at UN headquarters. Two years later, AARP obtained Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN, permitting it to participate more actively in UN affairs related to aging. In 1996, AARP helped found the Geneva International Network on Aging, a group that represented aging interests with all the international organizations headquartered in Geneva.

In 2007, AARP started an annual series of briefings on global aging at the UN focusing on trends and new developments in income security, health, and an enabling environment for aging populations. The annual UN-AARP Briefing Series on Global Aging takes place at the time that delegates from around the world attend the UN Social Development Commission or during other important UN convenings. AARP also participated in the five-year review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

Throughout the early 2000s, AARP continued to play a leadership role on the NGO Committee on

Aging at the UN and began to aggressively expand its international advocacy role on behalf of older persons, as well as the international exchange of policy-relevant information about aging issues.

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AARP continues to have an active program of international conferences that has focused on such topics as the aging workforce, long-term care, health care and health information technology, income security, retirement, livable communities, pharmaceuticals, and community-building. We collaborate with other organizations including the United Nations, World Economic Forum, European Commission, OECD, national governments, and the U.S. Department of State on international conferences, events,



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**AARP** Over the years, you have journeyed to many other countries as the CEO of AARP. Do you have any memorable anecdotes or lessons from your travels abroad?

**JAJ** I have many fond memories of my trips abroad, but a couple stand out. In April 2018, on a trip to promote the Chinese publication of my book *Disrupt Aging*, we also traveled to Japan. While there, we visited the Yamano Beauty College and met with Executive Chairman Mike Yamano.

Mike Yamano and his team at the Yamano Beauty College are truly age disruptors. Several years ago, he formed a partnership with USC's Leonard Davis School of Gerontology to create a curriculum for the Beauty College that introduces students to the health, social, and economic aspects of aging in society. The College also offers

a Health and Welfare course, which includes instruction in practical matters ranging from how to operate a wheelchair to how to wash and cut bed-bound clients' hair.

Mike said that he wanted to focus on aging clients because beauty is for all ages, and when you look better, you also feel better. The school is a tremendous success and has added a whole new dimension to what it means to age well in the world's oldest country.

Earlier this year, I led an AARP delegation to Africa to meet with top leaders from Kenya and Tanzania. We wanted to elevate the important fact that population aging is happening in developing countries. Two things occurred during this trip that were especially memorable.

During our meeting with President Hussein Mwinyi of Tanzania's Zanzibar region, where we were discussing the importance of pensions in providing financial security for older adults, he announced that he would introduce a plan to lower the universal pension age from 70 to 60 which would dramatically improve financial security for older adults in the region.



With Agnes Kariuki (front row, center) at the Kibera Day Care Centre for the Elderly in Kenya, February 2024.

When we arrived in Kenya, we went to Nairobi to visit Kibera — which is Africa's largest "informal settlement," or slum. That's where I met Agnes Kariuki who founded and ran the Kibera Day Care Centre for the Elderly.

Agnes had created the Center in 1989. Earlier in her career, she worked as an Extension Field Officer, promoting water and sanitation around Kenya. In that role, she saw the plight of older people, who faced neglect and abuse, and who lacked medical care and had many other unmet needs. She decided to do something about it.

Agnes was a champion in every sense of the word. She advocated for the rights of older people and worked tirelessly to meet their needs. She provided medical care, literacy training, a feeding program, and social activities to prevent loneliness among older Kenyans.

She started by supporting only 17 older adults. But thanks to her diligence and dedication, her organization grew and was supporting more than 3,200 older adults by the time we visited her. They do phenomenal work.

I was so grateful for the time we spent with Agnes. I came away from our visit with a plan to create a special Purpose Prize for her this year — to recognize, honor, and support her incredible work. Unfortunately, on the day we reached out to share the exciting news with her, Agnes passed away. We were stunned and saddened to learn the news.

But Agnes left a legacy of hope, compassion, and unwavering dedication. She created an institution that continues to thrive and support older persons. To honor her incredible legacy, AARP will provide grants to the Kibera Day Care Centre for the Elderly to support their ongoing work for the next three years. •