

Turning the Decade of Healthy Ageing into Action, in the U.S. and Across the World

By Jo Ann Jenkins

When the United Nations proclaimed 2021-2030 the “Decade of Healthy Ageing,” they noted that health is central to our experience of older age and the opportunities that aging brings. They challenged governments, civil society, international agencies, professionals, academia, the media, and the private sector to come together to improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live.

The “Decade of Healthy Ageing” recognizes that even though we know — and have known for many years — that the population is aging, and at an increasingly rapid pace, the world is not sufficiently prepared to secure the rights and respond to the needs of older people. At AARP, we believe that every person — in every country around the world — should have the opportunity to live a long and healthy life. Yet, our world has been turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. And older people, and those with underlying health conditions, have been hit the hardest.

According to a recent study published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, the COVID-19 pandemic led to decreases in life expectancy in 27 of the 29 countries analyzed, reversing a decades-old trend of increased life expectancy. These losses were largely attributed to increased mortality in people over age 60 and linked officially to COVID-19 deaths. The pandemic also contributed to deaths from other causes — such as cancer and cardiovascular disease — because of a lack of treatment or a delay in getting treatment.

Paradoxically, the pandemic also has helped to open our eyes to ways we can redefine health as we think about how we live and age in the post-pandemic world. It’s helped us better understand the expanding role technology can

play in helping people maintain their health and in delivering health care — both the opportunities and the challenges. And it has also helped us understand that as we approach a time when the number of people 65 and older is expected to have doubled by 2050, we must not only focus on increasing the lifespan, but we must also increase the health span — the years we maintain good health.

Healthy aging is a lifelong pursuit. It doesn’t begin at age 50 or 60 or 65. Likewise, it doesn’t just happen, and it’s not something one can do alone. That’s why at AARP we seek to create a society that supports healthy longevity across the life course:

- Where, for example, people have access to affordable health care at all ages,
- Where all people will be prepared to live longer, healthier lives,
- Where they will have more tools and knowledge to be proactive about their health and wellness,
- Where they will have access to a robust market of innovative health-related products and services that support longer, healthier lives, and
- Where we will all be better equipped to care for each other as we age.

In order to achieve that vision, people and societies across the globe must cast aside outdated attitudes and stereotypes about aging and understand that a healthy, engaged, and productive older population has the potential to be an economic boom, not an economic and social burden. It’s time to recognize that as we extend healthy longevity, the growing number of older people is not a drain on society, but a key

driver of economic growth, innovation, and new value creation.

In 2017, AARP decided to see how well prepared some of the world's major economies are for the challenges and opportunities their societies face as they age. We teamed with FP Analytics to take an in-depth look at how 12 countries¹ are adapting their societies to an aging population. Together, these countries represent 61 percent of the global GDP and nearly half of the world's population of people ages 65 and older.

The resulting "Aging Readiness and Competitiveness Report" (the ARC Report)² identified creative programs to promote volunteerism and entrepreneurship, lifelong learning in finance and technology, support for caregivers, and inter-generational communities.

In 2018, we did a second ARC Report³ focused on 10 smaller economies around the world⁴ — all of which have fewer than 25 million people — that are leaders in responding to demographic change. While all these countries face formidable challenges as a result of their aging populations — especially those related to housing, mobility, isolation, finance, and health care — we found that many of them are also coming up with innovative and flexible solutions to address many of these issues.

We need to empower societies around the world to both embrace the opportunities of aging to the fullest extent possible and address the attendant challenges. Healthy longevity requires societies to focus more on physical and mental fitness rather than diminishment alone — on preventing disease and improving well-being rather than simply treating ailments. Further, as we empower societies, we also need to empower individuals to become active partners in ensuring their own health and well-being.

If we prepare now, we can extend healthy longevity and productivity. As people live longer, healthier lives, they can stay in the workforce longer, whether motivated by desire or need. They can continue contributing to their families, communities, and society. They can delay or reduce admissions to hospitals and other care facilities and enjoy active, independent, and fulfilling lives while enriching their environments in many ways.

Achieving healthy longevity requires decisive, multisector action. In the past century, major breakthroughs have saved millions of lives that previously would have been lost to infectious diseases. However, not all these gains have been shared equally. And, again, this has become abundantly clear during the pandemic. We need a comprehensive global effort to guide the implementation of evidence-based strategies to advance healthy longevity among all people. We all have a role and a moral responsibility for this, from the personal to the private and public.

We need to explore innovative approaches to improve longer lives in practical and equitable ways. Toward that end, we recently convened a global conference of international experts and stakeholders focused on "Redefining Health: New Approaches for How We Live and Age." The conference explored how we can advance a global vision for healthy aging as a central strategy to reinvent, create, and build more resilient societies so people can live longer, healthier, and more productive lives.

At that conference, we also released ARC 3.0. Developed by Economist Impact and AARP, this report takes a thematic approach focused on innovations that promote healthy aging across four key areas: ensuring access to healthcare services for all older adults, strengthening the availability of long-term care and support for

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caregivers, supporting aging in place through community-centered care, and caring for older adults in crisis situations.

We also work with our international NGO partners to advocate for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030 and to co-chair the Stakeholder Group on Ageing with our partner, HelpAge International. And we are engaged in several initiatives to help achieve healthy longevity. Since 2019, we have collaborated with the U.S. National Academy of Medicine to launch The Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity, an initiative to bring together thought leaders from the full range of fields that touch on aging, "to identify the necessary priorities and directions for improving health, productivity, and quality of life for older adults worldwide."

Healthy longevity is not just about maintaining physical health, it's also about mental health. We have launched several initiatives to help people maintain and improve their brain health as they age, such as our Staying Sharp digital platform that provides users with tools and information that helps them protect and strengthen their brain. 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 also convened 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. And last year, we joined with Women Against Alzheimer's and Women's Alzheimer's Movement (founded by Maria Shriver) to release a landmark report, "The Role of Alzheimer's, Dementia and Caregiving on Women," which sets forth a strategy for improving women's brain-health research and policies over the next decade.

The key to helping people take advantage of generally longer and healthier lives in the coming years and decades is innovation. At AARP, 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. Our most recent innovation is the AgeTech Collaborative™. Through this platform, we're connecting leading AgeTech startups with investors, business services and industry experts and enterprises to address society's most pressing aging issues including caregiving, chronic illness management, social isolation, housing and more in order to generate big new ideas and send innovative new products into what is now an \$8 trillion economy.

Empowering innovators, and — just as crucially, establishing a medium where they can communicate with one another, and their consumers — is critical to ensuring that this inventive energy truly makes a difference in helping people live better as they age. We must all work together to harness the promises of

technology to improve health and assistance through robotics, artificial intelligence, and access to information.

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The opportunity to live longer, healthier, more productive lives is one of humankind's greatest accomplishments. Capitalizing on such an unprecedented opportunity, however, will require new approaches to how we live and age and a commitment to innovation across all sectors of society, from the personal, private and public. Only then can we create the sort of healthy longevity that the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing hopes to promote and inspire for all. ●



Jo Ann Jenkins
CEO, AARP

¹ The countries are: Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Israel, Japan, Korea, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

² <https://www.aarp.org/arc3>

³ <https://arc2018.aarpinternational.org/>

⁴ The countries are Australia, Chile, Costa Rica, Lebanon, Mauritius, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, and Taiwan.