

Dignity and Quality of Life: Prioritizing Aging Issues in Chile

<https://doi.org/10.26419/int.00051.023>

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Chile is experiencing profound demographic changes. We find ourselves at an advanced stage of the population aging process. With a life expectancy of 80.7 years in our country, older persons now represent almost 20 percent of the population. But this reality will affect us even more in the coming decades, as it is expected that by 2050, our country's percentage of older persons will rise to become the second highest in Latin America, comprising 32 percent of the population.

Nowadays, population aging does not just mean an increased number of older adults compared to the past, but also that people are living longer. It is the so-called "aging of the elderly." In Chile, 15 percent of older persons are over 80 — an important age when considering life changes: Although 86 percent of older persons are independent, this drops to 60 percent for those over 80. This enormous demographic change is without a doubt generating a profound social, economic, and cultural impact, affecting areas like health, pensions, work, the design of cities, care, social integration, and community life, among other aspects.

A Challenge Both Societal and Concrete

Despite sustained population growth of this segment in recent years, and the systematic increase of older persons' participation in different areas of society, today we face a problem of social exclusion based on misconceived perceptions, stigmas, and prejudice regarding older persons and aging. Positive traits associated with aging are underestimated while negative ones are exaggerated which can lead to the exclusion of older people from participation in society.

The Fifth Older People Inclusion and Exclusion Survey in Chile in 2017, conducted by the University of Chile and the



National Agency for Older Persons, shows this pessimistic and dispiriting perception of aging in Chile, which without a doubt is distant from reality. The survey found that 73 percent of people consider older persons to be socially marginalized, and 68 percent believe they cannot fend for themselves, when in reality, older persons have low levels of functional dependency, with only 14.2 percent having some degree of this.

A negative connotation to aging does not just exclude older individuals from the social setting, it also causes people to not want to accept that they themselves are aging, leading to lack of preparation for this stage

of life. If we want to reverse this situation, a cultural change, a change of paradigm on how we see aging and older persons needs to be instilled. We have to change the negative vision of aging, so as to fully integrate older persons into the broader world, releasing them from stereotypes and thus creating all the conditions needed for people to thrive in later years. This change in vision entails seeing aging as a process that has no connection to impairment and dependence, but one of new possibilities for participation, development, and autonomy.

Older persons have much to learn and even more to give. We need to foster and

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make visible their contribution to the social, family, economic, and cultural life of countries, showing that they are not a problem but rather an asset.

A Commitment Now Visible

Facing the reality of the aging of our population, and in supporting the commitment of the government of my husband, the President, Sebastián Piñera, to place older persons at the heart of public policy, I have focused on leading initiatives that support those people later in life. In 2018, we created the “Better Ageing” Program, where we worked together with the National Agency for Older Persons to strengthen older persons’ social integration and foster positive and healthy aging. With this goal, we raised up and highlighted a set of concrete initiatives and actions provided by each one of the different ministries and public services in our country.

We are also adjusting and attuning all our internal policies and regulations to the guidelines and goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons, and WHO’s 2021–2030 Decade of Health Ageing, where,

as a country, we have been working hard.

Since the end of 2018, we have been working hard on WHO’s Age Friendly Cities program, with a community approach so that localities can become more age-friendly by encouraging active aging, participation, and safety. In 2018, when we started this program as a Government, fewer than 10 communities formed part of WHO’s Network. Today, we have 180 communities involved.

Alongside this, we have developed different initiatives that promote greater mobility and participation for older people, such as a 50 percent reduction for older persons in the cost of public transportation, the reduction in real estate taxes, and free access to national parks, among other benefits.

Likewise, I would like to highlight the work done to strengthen the socio-legal defense of older persons in our country. In order for older adults to receive prompt and specialized attention regarding their legal needs, we created a program called Senior Citizen Defense Counsel, which secures lawyers throughout the country to provide free, specialized legal advice to older persons (or the

community) who may be facing situations of abuse, mistreatment, violence, and/or infringement of their rights.

Also key has been the work done in the creation of a socio-health model, developed to foster older adult's functional ability and independence through the integration of Chile's social and health systems. As we know, it is possible to prevent dependence if certain conditions associated with a reduction of intrinsic capacity are diagnosed and addressed quickly.

Along this line, we have implemented Acute Geriatric Units for older people in Chile's hospitals, an initiative that uses an integrated attention model to promptly and effectively treat the acute clinical condition they are admitted for, enabling their initial functional recovery and helping to prevent dependence. This goes hand in hand with a 50 percent increase in the number of Geriatric specialists in our country; while the number of such specialists remains very low, the growth gives reason for hope that the trend will continue.

One of the main pillars of this socio-health network are our country's Day Centers. These are spaces that promote and strengthen the autonomy of older people, contributing towards delaying their loss of functionality. In just three years, we have gone from 18 centers to almost 100, and we hope to reach one per community over the next six years. Part of this network is a group of condominiums that allow older people to live independently while also sharing in community with others of a similar age.

Many of the actions to implement the socio-health model in our country will be developed through Chile's Integrated Health Plan for Older Persons of the Ministry of Health. This work is an extension of the public policies for aging, safeguarding the functional health of older persons.

An Ongoing Commitment Means Ongoing Work

All of this is the result of a commitment that, as a country, we develop and implement strong policies and solutions for older persons. We are focused on this and I am convinced that we will continue implementing actions and policies that allow us to achieve healthy, active, and participatory aging.

But I have to mention that while we have made progress, we still have a long way to go. There are seemingly infinite challenges and changes to implement to achieve a new reality: that we, the older members of society, have a place in it, and have the quality of life we deserve.

As we keep saying, what's important is not just living longer, but that any additional years are ones lived with dignity and a good quality of life. ●



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