



UN
Volunteers

Voluntary Action by Older Persons



Second World Assembly on Ageing
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VOLUNTARY ACTION BY OLDER PERSONS

“Older persons should be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities”(United Nations Principles for Older Persons, UN General Assembly Resolution 46/91 of 16 December 1991)

For older people the ageing process is generally accompanied by a transition in social and economic roles. In some societies, people move from full-time, formal work to retirement, in others into part-time work of an informal nature. This transition is often treated, erroneously, as a move from a productive role to a non-productive or dependent one. Most older people, far from withdrawing from participation in society, continue to contribute actively to their household, to their descendants and to their community or society although this contribution may not necessarily be measurable in monetary terms. Rather than producing goods and services, contributions may include a socially valued product like counselling, mentoring, child-care, peer care, end-of-life care or community leadership, political involvement or role model figures. Such non-monetary endeavours may have high economic and human benefits, but they generally go unrecognized.

The term “Productive Ageing” means a continuation of peoples’ economic role but a change in its nature. Retirement and volunteering in old age goes far beyond productive ageing, as the ‘product’ is not material but more a contribution to the expertise of life transmitted to other generations. Most literature on ageing refers only cursorily to the changing ways older people engage actively in society and rarely emphasizes the wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom that is available and serves as role model for future generations. This gap in knowledge has serious implications for the development of public policy aimed at the encouraging the fullest participation of older people in society.

There are at least two facets to the case in favour of considering the contribution of older people to society through voluntary action. The traditional one, the *assets approach*, focuses on the notion that older people, as the most rapidly growing segment of the population in many parts of the world, constitute a major resource to be tapped into. Not only do older people fill gaps that the State and the Market are unable or unwilling to fill, but also many organizations could not function without the active involvement of older people with their expertise, networks, and knowledge. In many developing regions, older people play a pivotal role, not only in households but also, and more so, at the community level. Traditional cultures have preserved the important role of elders; they are looked up to for decisions, counselling, and wisdom. Modern society seems to have forgotten the dimension of accumulated experience and knowledge in the name of ‘high tech’, youth celebration, and materially-focussed recognition criteria. The dearth of information on this contribution has fuelled the stereotyping of older people as unproductive, dependent and subject to irreversible decline. This myth needs to be broken, as older persons today are active, healthy, and independent for many more years than at any time before.

The notion of the value of contributions of older people has been complemented in recent years by a *benefit approach* which views voluntary action as a means of combating marginalization, helping older people to retain self-respect and a sense of purpose, and contributing to healthy life styles and independence. It also helps society as a whole to be cohesive and respectful towards

the human dimension and the last period of life, including death. This line of thinking was given significant impetus by a landmark statement on volunteering in the outcome document of the June 2000 special session of the UN General Assembly on the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and Beyond.¹

The underlying concept is that all voluntary action is based on reciprocity, immediate, or delayed. Young people who volunteer are more employable, working adults gain status in the community through voluntary action, while the link between volunteering and longevity for older people is now being empirically demonstrated. The elders live longer, age longer, are in better health, and are more educated than ever. In many situations, people who are able to help others can expect favourable consideration if and when they find themselves in need of support. The “insurance” aspect of volunteering is particularly prevalent in developing countries where voluntary action most often takes the form of mutual aid and self help. Seen in this light, voluntary action becomes a first line of defence against poverty and vulnerability, not only enhancing older peoples’ possibilities of managing their risks and promoting their development capacities, but also playing a role in terms of their impact on future generations. From this point of view, the implications of the exclusion of older people, and the poorer segments of older people in particular, becomes more apparent. Today, four to five generations live at the same time, with two generations at retirement age. This is an unprecedented change in history, and gives a new meaning to volunteering between generations. The feminization of ageing, with a majority of women in old age, also brings a new aspect: older women who have been natural and unrecognized volunteers in their family and community throughout their life are very active in old age, but are not recognized, promoted or networked efficiently.

There are many barriers confronting older people who wish to volunteer. In the context of formal service volunteering, they often encounter discrimination in the form of ‘ageism’, and general prejudice on the part of potential user organizations, which limits them to working with other older people or restricting their involvement completely. They are also challenged by restricted access to information about opportunities to volunteer and difficulties of physical access to such opportunities due to economic and other factors. Moreover, because of the perception of older people as passive *receivers* of assistance rather than *solvers* of their own and community problems, resources are rarely channelled to initiatives initiated or run by them. The potential payback that can flow from providing social infrastructure and finance for mutual support and other schemes which permit older people to join forces, to plan collectively, with and for other generations, and to link up with external agencies (including for the purpose of seeking employment possibilities or credit), is only starting to be recognized.

The 39th session of the Commission for Social Development (CSD) in February 2001 and the 56th session of the UN General Assembly in December 2001 both considered the various ways governments and the UN system can support volunteering. During both general debates, a number of governments drew attention to the need to reflect the concerns of older people and the contributions they make to society through voluntary action. The need for the issue to figure more prominently in the World Assembly on Ageing was also raised. The General Assembly resolution on volunteering² adopted at the 56th session underlined the need to consider that all means should be available for older persons to become involved in voluntary activities.

¹ A/S-24/8/Rev.1, annex, sect. III, commitment 4, paras. 54 and 55

² A/RES/56/38

The challenge of giving explicit economic, social and moral value to older peoples' contributions to their communities and nations needs to be addressed. Only in this way will governments and other development actors be in a position to make the correct choices in their strategies to combat poverty and, exclusion, conflict, and discrimination, and if policy is to be inclusive in preserving a society for all ages and generations. Through volunteering and social contacts, older people also stay more active and healthy physically, mentally, socially and spiritually which can only benefit society as a whole. Their contribution goes far beyond a social role—they can be the future promoters of key UN issues such as human rights, environment protection, health, and peace. By installing a “memory” of hatred or peace to their descendants, they can be a powerful influence over the way conflict is seen by their family, their society, and their nations.

The Second World Assembly for Ageing provides an excellent opportunity to highlight the reciprocal benefits to older persons that accrue from voluntary action and to consider ways of ensuring an enabling environment for older persons to remain active through this form of citizen engagement.

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