



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

What should the post-2015 development agenda accomplish for older persons and families?"

NGO COMMITTEE ON AGING

**9th October 2013
ECOSOC CHAMBER
(9:00am–13:00pm)
UN, NEW YORK**

SHIREEN SAID

POLICY ADVISOR- HUMAN RIGHTS

BUREAU FOR DEVELOPMENT POLICY

I am very pleased to participate today in this 23rd annual United Nations observance of the International Day of Older Persons and to share some insights on the post 2015 development agenda and what it means to older persons.

But let me begin by first thanking the NGO Committee on Aging, especially Ms Erica Dhar, Ms Katherine Kline & Mr Jim Collins, for this opportunity to participate in this important discussion. Also allow me to congratulate all of you within this sector for the passion and efforts these past years to ensure fuller consideration of the rights of older persons and for convening this meeting as a contribution to the overall discourse and advocacy for a stronger rights agenda for older persons.

May I also say that this discussion is timely in that in the next few months we will draw closer to the adoption of a new development agenda? At the same time, we are likely to be on the eve of a new instrument on human rights or as some of us hope. With this as a backdrop and although the acceleration efforts to achieve the MDGs by 2015 continue, this is an opportune moment to reflect on what has worked and what hasn't during the last thirteen years.

Excellencies and Colleagues,

With rapid population aging and the unprecedented increase in the number of people over 60 years old, global ageing has become one of the most fundamental issues of our time. Those over 60 already constitute 11 per cent of the world's population, and this number is increasing. Already 66 percent of the world's older persons live in developing countries, by 2050, it will be 70percent and by 2100 it will be 85 percent. By 2030, there will be more people 65 and over than children under five.

Unfortunately, for a long time, older persons have not been given their due and deserved consideration. Current realities globally have significantly re-arranged the world, its structures, processes and systems. Changing patterns of migration, the Aids pandemic, modern urban living has subsequently also

changed the role of family life and the role of different generations. Older persons especially in developing countries are now primary care-givers to younger children and in some instances formally termed elderly headed households. With more youth unemployment and where social protection exists, older persons qualifying for social grants can be the main contributors in supporting the entire family which may cause its own tension inter-generationally and contribute to family dysfunctionality. Not factoring in these realities into state policies and programmes, has unfortunately shaped the narrative to the current situation where in many instances older persons are now considered marginalized, vulnerable and excluded.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), their targets and indicators are silent on elderly persons and age disaggregation. In addition, national and international reports on MDGs hardly make any mention of aging, thus being an issue of continuous critique from civil society, particularly groups working on the rights of elderly persons.¹ Older persons, are one of the groups that has felt more significantly the fact of not being directly included in the MDG goals, targets and indicators, and consequently also being left out of national efforts to achieve the MDGs including in implementing policies, plans and reports.

Unfortunately to date, the response to the plight that older persons in the majority face has, to a large extent, remained benevolent, reactive and all too often heart wrenching, when regard is had to the abuses that often occur.

If the new development agenda intends to leave no one behind and if human development is about expanding the choices people have to lead lives which they value, having the resources which would make those choices

¹ Helpage International, Global Action on Aging

meaningful and the security to ensure that those choices can be exercised in peace; if human development is more than just economic growth, then the current narrative on older persons must change.

A new development framework has to recognize the category of older persons and that they are the subject of rights, active participants in their own development and not merely passive beneficiaries of State policies. Inherent in this recognition is their dignity and worth as human beings. In so doing, a new development agenda will factor in the growing number of older persons and support them in staying productive and active members in society and provide dignified care and support when they can no longer take care of themselves. As an anecdote, evidenced from reviewing the ages of those in senior levels of certain realms such as business and the judiciary, the most prolific and influential figures are older persons and age is synonymous with wisdom and reverence. In fact a more recent trend is to appoint retired Judges as Chairpersons of National Human Rights Institutions for example as has been the case in Zambia and India. However, it is a myth that older people cannot or do not work. Figures show more than 70 per cent of men and nearly 40 per cent of women over 60 continue to work and in some countries, these figures are even higher and often do not account for the many older people, particularly women, who are doing unpaid work or work in the informal sector.

Similarly, the international legal framework on the rights of older persons is not very comprehensive on older persons. There is neither a dedicated instrument nor explicit provision on older persons. The overall human rights principle enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is non-discrimination and recognizes the dignity of human beings. However the broader issue is that age as an impermissible ground of discrimination has to

be more explicit and obvious especially for states and non-state actors from which benchmarks and minimum standards would have to be developed.

The only two human rights instruments that include specific provision on age and older persons are the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 11) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 13, 16, 25 and 28), all welcome references but do not deal with older persons as a category entitled to the full gambit of rights. The Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families contains a general prohibition on the basis of age. Lessons learned from previous instruments, is to define the category, include socio-economic provisions, and build in monitoring and evaluation systems and/or other systems of accountability that connect law, its policies and systems. Finally support to ensure active civil society, national human rights institutions or other equivalent institutions of accountability is also imperative.

In addition, few human rights bodies have discussed the rights of elderly persons in their general comments and recommendations (CESRC, CEDAW and the HRC). CAT has been rather silent in comparison to the other committees especially given the cruel inhumane and degrading treatment that many older persons face. These committees have also included the rights of the elderly persons in their Concluding Observations of the various States' reports. Finally, two of the Special Procedures, more specifically, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health and the Independent Expert on human rights and extreme poverty have respectively conducted a thematic study and a report on the right to health of elderly persons and old age and non-contributory pensions.

In addition, to international human rights mechanisms and instruments, the UN system has adopted several non-legally binding reports, including two Action Plans on Aging (adopted in Vienna in 1982 and Madrid 2002), and a number of General Assembly resolutions and Secretary General's Reports.

The recent resolution of the Human Rights Council to appoint an Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older Persons is welcome and hopefully is a gauge suggesting that an instrument may be imminent. Perhaps the wider anticipation is that this mandate will enable and enhance a greater connect with development.

Whilst the mandate of the Independent Expert evolves, institutions of accountability especially at the national level and with more than a 100 worldwide, National Human Rights Institutions, an outcome of the Paris Principles adopted in 1993, serve as national structures for ensuring compliance with international standards and integration of human rights at a national level. GA resolution A/HRC/16/21 recently granted standing to NHRIs to make representation before the HRC for the Universal Periodic Review of member states implementation of human rights.

NHRIs can also serve as promoters for the advancement of older persons, policy lobbyists, serve as repositories of information especially if they are linked to national statistical officers. Information management systems, we can all agree have been one of the most glaring omissions of the MDGs. Moreover with their standing at the HRC, NHRIs can serve as monitors on the implementation of the UPR recommendations as well as consolidate overall recommendations and form part of the lobby for positioning issues, independently of civil society.

Excellencies, Colleagues and friends,

The situation of older persons has also become a priority in the UN proposed agenda, with thanks to you and organisations like yourselves.

The Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPF-I), launched by the UN system Chief Executives Board for Coordination in April 2009, recognizes the importance of social protection as a necessary component of a comprehensive development strategy that addresses poverty, inequality and social exclusion and at the same time seeks to invest in people as a prerequisite for sustainable and fairly shared economic growth. It consequently seeks to support countries to put in place a minimum level of social protection for all.² This is particularly relevant to elderly persons. Several UN agencies recommend that National Social Protection Floors, among the most essential social security guarantees should include basic income security for people in old age.³

The priorities of older persons and other groups were reflected in the UN Secretary General report⁴ which acknowledges the fact that the elderly are among the most vulnerable and excluded groups, and include age as an inequality factor, together with income, gender, ethnicity, disability and location, that has hampered progress to achieve the MDGs.

The Secretary-General, in his recommendations on the main issues to be addressed in the post 2015 development goals, recommends that countries with an ageing population need policy responses to support the elderly so as to remove barriers to their full participation in society while protecting their rights and dignity.

² UN system Task team on the post 2015 UN Development Agenda, Social Protection, a development priority in the post 2015 development agenda, Thematic Think Piece, ECA, ILO, UNCTAD, UNDESA, UNICEF, May 2012

³ Ibid

⁴ Report of the Secretary-General – A life of dignity for all: accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, July 2013,

The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda – A New Global Partnership – Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development benefitted from extensive consultations including with older people. The report highlights the demographic change the world is facing, including the rapid aging of the population, which should be taken fully into consideration for the post 2015 development agenda.

The report proposes five fundamental shifts – leave no one behind; put sustainable development at the core; transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth; build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all; and forge a new global partnership.

Whether a goal or mainstreamed, the language, evidence to substantiate and narrative will be crucial going forward. However, we need also to look beyond that and reflect how the overall proposed framework and its main pillars can influence the wellbeing of older persons throughout the world.

There is no doubt that the framework of rights has an extensive history and legitimacy however human rights measures are still under development and there is still a potential disconnect between their ideal impact and the way these rights actually affect individuals.

Notwithstanding global efforts, national lobbying and advocacy at the country level especially with national governments remains vital to the overall positioning of older persons.

Another effective strategy is regional lobbying and engaging with member states at the regional level.

Excellencies and colleagues

To conclude:

Savvy, strategic positioning in discourse at the global, regional and national levels will reinforce the call to action for the rights of older persons to be specifically acknowledged and supported in the post-2015 development processes and indeed in all processes that impact their lives and livelihoods;

Identifying champions especially to position this agenda at a strategic, political and technical level will contribute significantly as well as challenge stereotypes. These champions should capitalize on the current Open Ended Working Groups at the global level. More importantly, the same or equivalent engagement at the national level to ensure that member states are fully cognizant of and supported by the national chapters is imperative. This is in full recognition that the finalization of a new development agenda is the prerogative of Member States.

I end, on what would ordinarily be a lighthearted quote by Ann Landers, who probably did not anticipate the quote to summarise the current situation but which resonates with this agenda;

At age 20, we worry about what others think of us. At age 40, we don't care what they think of us. At age 60, we discover they haven't been thinking of us at all."

Ann Landers (1918–2002).

Whatever our age human rights do not stop at 60.

With this, I thank you for your attention and look forward to continued discussion on taking this agenda forward.