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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development
and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving
poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and
decent work for all

Statement submitted by International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

Statement

Introduction and purpose

The International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics is a multidisciplinary academic organization that promotes gerontological research and training in biological, medical, behavioural and social aspects of ageing in order to improve the well-being of ageing individuals. The basic assumptions on which the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics operates are the following:

(a)   Human beings can develop until old age through capacity-building;

(b)   Some aspects of the ageing process can be modified or reversed;

(c)   Human dignity and equal rights before the law are important values in research and social policy development;

(d)   The independence of ageing individuals in the physical, mental, social and economic aspects of their lives is the most important goal of research and social policy development.

On the basis of these assumptions, we would like to suggest some ideas for the empowerment of disadvantaged older persons. The purpose of this statement is to change the common way of thinking in order to empower older persons by looking at human life as an exchange of resources between ageing individuals and/or social institutions and by looking at an ageing society as an "age-integrated society".

Overview of the issues of poverty, social exclusion and unemployment of older persons

Human life can be seen as an exchange of resources between individuals and/or social institutions. Imbalanced exchanges may result in imbalanced power relationships. Thus, those with less power may fall into disadvantaged situations such as poverty, social exclusion and unemployment as a result. In this sense, "empowerment" means to make power more balanced by increasing and/or improving resources.

Older persons have few chances to increase their resources owing to social forces such as ageism, irrational social discrimination, institutionalized social exclusion (such as mandatory retirement systems) and negative perceptions of older persons. It is therefore important to balance power relationships between individuals and/or social institutions by helping older persons improve their existing resources, increase their resources or acquire new resources. Ageism and negative perceptions of ageing society based upon prejudice and non-scientific assumptions seem to have reinforced the image of older persons as powerless. The social welfare perspective of supporting and caring for older persons after their exclusion from mainstream society, which has been the main social/institutional arrangement in advanced welfare States, puts serious limitations on integrating older persons into society and building a sustainable ageing society. Therefore, a new paradigm that facilitates the empowerment of older persons and contributes to building a sustainable ageing society needs to be developed. The new paradigm, called the "age-integrated society" is, in some respects, similar to the theme "Towards a society for all ages" that was proclaimed for the International Year for Older Persons in 1999.

The age-integrated society will:

(a)   Ensure a system of income security;

(b)   Integrate older persons into society by providing them with appropriate roles in accordance with their capacities;

(c)   Provide education and training opportunities to build their capacities;

(d)   Provide educational opportunities for life planning and preparation for old age;

(e)   Extend the length of middle age in accordance with the changing social perception of old age;

(f)   Provide age-friendly environments in workplaces and communities.

The empowerment of older persons has intellectual, health, socioeconomic, psychological and political aspects.

• **Intellectual empowerment**. The most effective means of empowering older persons is to increase and/or enhance the quality of existing resources. Older persons' knowledge and skills are usually considered outmoded. As a result, older workers may not be viewed as attractive candidates for employment or retention beyond traditional retirement ages. Therefore, systematic education and training programmes need to be developed to improve and/or increase their capacities. Such programmes should include courses on new vocational knowledge and skills, life planning and preparation for old age, and access to information technologies.

• **Health empowerment**. An adequate level of health is one of a person's most powerful resources, and a substantial proportion of older persons are inhibited from working or making a more positive contribution to society because of their deteriorating health. Adoption of an institutionalized health-care system for middle-aged and older persons is an important way to empower older persons. From our experience in the Republic of Korea, along with universal health care under social insurance, the institution of periodic (every two years) health examinations for those aged 40 years and over has proven effective in promoting health and preventing disease. This helps to mitigate the burden of chronic non-communicable diseases, and thereby to maintain the positive contribution of older persons to society. Such a health-care system, under the auspices of the World Health Organization or similar international body, needs to develop universal minimum training curricula for schools of medicine, nursing, social work and allied professions for the special needs and care of older persons.

• **Socioeconomic empowerment**. The most direct way to empower older persons is the adoption of income-security programmes, including social assistance and/or social insurance. That may ensure that older persons have basic resources for exchange. Social insurance schemes for old age should be mandatory for all workers as a preventive measure against poverty in old age. Public sector jobs that utilize knowledge and skills accumulated throughout life need to be created. Negative images of ageing, prevalent in all societies, need to be reversed through scientific research and social awareness. Both Governments and civil society need to encourage a social movement that promotes active ageing.

- **Psychological empowerment**. Since self-efficacy and self-confidence can be strong drivers of motivation and are related to the individual's desire to improve a disadvantageous situation, the self-efficacy and self-confidence of the disadvantaged need to be strengthened through appropriate social services.

- **Political empowerment**. It is important to mobilize older persons in order to bring pressure to bear on policymakers by organizing civil society groups of older persons and requesting that older persons be represented in local and national policymaking and policy-evaluation activities.

Efforts of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics to empower older persons

Since its founding in 1950, the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics has held world congresses every four years and regional congresses (Africa, Asia, Oceania, Europe, North America and South America) every four years, at which the whole agenda related to the ageing process and its consequences on the society, including research and policy development to empower older persons based on theories and practices, has been widely discussed. In the past four years, the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics has developed educational and training programmes to help geriatricians and important professionals in the field of gerontological services. Eighty-three national associations of gerontology and geriatrics from 71 Member States have exerted their own efforts to empower older persons. For the past three years, the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics has also made efforts to encourage the United Nations to adopt a convention on the human rights of older persons by participating in the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older Persons, an international collaborative body of non-governmental organizations working to empower older persons based on the ideas of exchange and an age-integrated society.

Recommendations

Ideas without strategies for translating them into actual policies are not very useful. Some strategies that the United Nations, national societies and civil society groups could adopt are given below. These strategies can be part of the deliberations on a post-2015 development agenda.

- **Different goals of poverty eradication**. Individual Governments and the United Nations need to set different goals for eradicating poverty in accordance with the level of socioeconomic development of the country concerned. It would be desirable to prioritize the goals in terms of the degree of poverty: (a) extreme poverty; (b) absolute poverty; and (c) relative poverty.

- **Integration of welfare and employment services**. Welfare and employment services need to be integrated so that welfare services can promote the employment of older persons.

- **Comprehensive community service delivery systems**. Existing community service delivery systems need to be restructured to mobilize all kinds of community resources to help empower older persons by networking among all the formal and informal social organizations in communities.

- **International responsibility**. In the light of rapidly advancing globalization, international aid and transfers of experience between developing and

developed countries are needed more than ever. Developed countries should bear more responsibilities for the eradication of poverty in developing countries.

• **Civil society pressure on policymakers**. Civil society groups should pressure policymakers, nationally and internationally, to give priority to poverty eradication over all other policy agenda items.

• **Developing educational/training programmes for empowerment of older persons**. Educational and training programmes can be developed with the assistance of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics.

Conclusion

Since the importance of research on ageing and policy development for older persons is growing as societies age, the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, as a multidisciplinary academic organization, has an important mission: to help the United Nations, its Member States and civil society build sustainable ageing societies by undertaking research and developing appropriate policies. In addition, the education and training of professionals who work with older persons can contribute to the empowerment of older persons, who will then be able to improve their existing resources, increase resources or acquire new resources.

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