N.G.O. FORUM

Non Governmental Organizations
Recommendations to the
WORLD ASSEMBLY ON AGING

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INTRODUCTION

THE AGING AND THE FAMILY

THE ECONOMIC NEEDS
AND CHALLENGES OF AGEING SOCIETIES

THE MAINTENANCE OF AN ADEQUATE LEVEL OF PERSONAL INCOME

THE REDISTRIBUTION OF TIME
AND LIFELONG EDUCATION

THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF THE AGING

THE NEEDS OF THE AGING IN THE AREAS
OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

AGING WOMEN

CONCLUSION
INTRODUCTION

In March 1982, 336 delegates from 43 countries, representing 159 Organizations concerned with ageing and old age met at the Vienna International Centre.

The project of this Forum, initiated by the International Center of Social Gerontology and seconded by the New York and Vienna Non Governmental Organizations Committees, had aroused the United Nations Secretary-General’s interest and owes its success to the help and support given by the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and by the Austrian Government. The Planning Committee and the participants to the Forum wish to express their utmost gratitude.

The large number of participants shows how aware the Non Governmental Organizations are of the unique nature of the convening of the World Assembly on Aging and of the contribution they can make to the International Plan of Action which will be discussed there.

The study of the themes proposed during the months preceding the Forum and the discussions which took place during the working sessions have resulted in the conclusions and recommendations presented in this report.

This report is brought to the United Nations Secretary-General’s and to the governmental delegations to the World Assembly’s attention; it conveys the point of view of all associations directly involved in action for the aging, with a strong wish, which has been expressed time and again, that their ideas shall become practical achievements in all countries.

The Non Governmental Organizations express the hope that the role they can play in the implementation of the Plan of Action be encouraged by Intergovernmental Organizations and Governments, which should to this end provide for them a clearly defined status, operational freedom and independence, as well as financial, administrative and taxation facilities.

At all levels, and especially at the national level, structures should be set up with a view to developing the consultation process between the public and private sectors and to coordinating the information and various activities concerning older persons. Intergovernmental
bodies and Governments alike should consider allocating budgetary and extra-budgetary funds so as to encourage Non Governmental Organizations to prepare proposals jointly with the aging. Such activities should reach not only those in need of special services, but also aging population groups who effectively contribute to the development of societies.

The strengthening of the participation of Non Governmental Organizations is also recommended in the field of pluri-disciplinary research and planning of the economy.

As a conclusion, the United Nations and its Agencies are urged to reinforce the structures that would ensure efficient cooperation with Non Governmental Organizations for the implementation of the International Plan of Action. In view of the role that the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs has been playing within United Nations in the field of Aging, the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs should continue to serve as the focal point for activities in that field.
THE AGING AND THE FAMILY

Under the various forms it may take, the family remains the best guarantee of the material and spiritual welfare of its older members.

Relationships within the family vary in form and meaning from one society to another, according to the cultural, social and economic background, but they are still essential for the intergenerational network of assistance, communication and services. These exchanges indeed work both ways: personal contact between children and elderly are for the former and the latter a source of fulfilment, learning and creativity. And the burden imposed by the aging is offset by the various forms of assistance in cash or services that they frequently render to their children and grand-children. Because of this reciprocity, it is within the family that distinctions on the grounds of chronological age are blurred, that intergenerational conflicts subside, whereas too strong reliance on the State increases the dependence of the aging on the others.

The study of the changes in family structures and practices mainly characterized by a greater geographical scattering of the family members and the change in the status and role of women make possible an adaptation of the function of community-based mutual help networks and encourage measures governments should take in order to reinforce and supplement the supporting role of the family.

Assistance and unpaid care services given by the family to its elderly members represent a substantial share of the informal economy which do not appear in the gross national product. This informal economy will undoubtedly be the only way of ensuring survival for the elderly in those countries without enough resources to develop an institutionalized assistance.

It is therefore unanimously recognized that the mutual respect across generations, necessary to family solidarity, is based on the ethical and philosophical values of the societies and cultures of the world. This solidarity is strengthened by a transfer of knowledge and skills and by economic links. It cannot however fully come into play, if the family has not the means necessary in order to meet basic priority needs.
Considering these principles, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - An old age policy be developed, integrated in a three-generation family policy, and that in the continuity of the family the older members be taken into account on an equal footing with the younger ones; that the public authorities give in all fields of life their support to the setting up and development of relationships between parents and children.

B - The family's capacity to support older members, both within the home and in the community be strengthened:

- through a realistic assessment of the care a family can - and cannot - provide for its older members,
- by providing specific information to families on programmes and services available to assist older persons retain their autonomy and enhance their well-being,
- through such specific means as home health care and help and through providing moral and spiritual assistance to the families with their essential responsibilities,
- offering to those who provide care to older members of the family training and guidance to assist effectively persons with chronic conditions,
- by offering to families providing continuous and often demanding care to an older member by the possibility of being relieved from time to time of this burden through such programmes as day hospitals and day care centres, for respite and holidays,
- by recognizing to grand-parents legal responsibilities and rights in the upbringing and care of their grand-children,
- by providing a possibility of integration in a family environment for the elderly without a family.

C - Housing be designed to accommodate older family members without unnecessarily restricting their autonomy and planning communities that facilitate the older family members' participation in the neighbourhood and the community.

D - The essential role that the family plays or should play never prevent the public authorities from ensuring to the elderly the means for a healthy and dignified life.
THE ECONOMIC NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF AGEING SOCIETIES

In societies of the past, each member of the society could, almost imperceptibly, adapt his activities as he advanced in age. As the family or tribal group functioned as a unit of production as well as a unit of consumption, the well-being of all the members depended on each member’s contribution.

For those whose physical strength was diminishing, other means - non negligible means since they frequently involved responsibilities as leaders or educators - were made available to enable them to contribute to their families or to the life of the group. Solidarity was practiced to the fullest, in terms of both production and consumption, and the destiny of each member, be he the least productive, could be compared to the destiny of the group as a whole.

In contemporary society, millions of older persons live in communities, where the tradition of mutual aid is still alive. However, the situation began to change almost everywhere, although at different times, when the decline in birth rates and the increase in longevity caused a rise in the proportion of the aging and each step towards modernization only served to weaken traditional forms of solidarity.

Through industrialization, families ceased to be decentralized units of production and their subsistence has increasingly become dependent on the salaried employment of the breadwinner.

In the industrialized countries and in a growing number of developing nations, the citizens are classified, from an economic point of view, as active or inactive, producers or consumers. This Manichaean distinction creates inequalities and inequities which characterize most societies.
For a fairer distribution of available resources, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - The negative stereotyping of elderly people as consumers of health and social services be combated with recognition of their corporate economic power.

B - Economists be urged to advance research to calculate the market input old people have in society rather than merely quote figures that cite the cost of aging for natural resources that belong to all and for the wealth they have contributed to by their work.

C - The elderly recognize their own economic power and organize themselves so as to use this power for the adoption of policies taking their interests into consideration and for their own participation in those policies.

D - Social justice in the developing countries be promoted by:

- the active continuation of relief action under the auspices of «minimum needs programs» to assure that developing governments divert resources for the aged,

- the re-ordering of public investment into agrarian reform,

- facilitating the organization of the action of the poor by the poor for the protection of their human rights and for the acceleration of their ability to influence the non-poor who appropriate funds on their behalf.
THE MAINTENANCE OF AN ADEQUATE LEVEL OF PERSONAL INCOME

Government intervention in this field first took place a century ago in what are now the industrialized countries, fifty years ago in several of the Latin American countries, and in the last two decades in an increasing number of the developing countries.

Because most workers were unable to accumulate savings themselves against their uncertain future, the first forms of social security established on the basis of collective, mandatory saving, were set up.

Today's economy, characterized by pervasive and persistent inflation, is indeed an unfavorable climate for personal, voluntary saving. This situation has resulted in the State playing a greater role and in the use of financing methods in which the income of the aging does not come from their own accumulated contributions, but is provided by immediately putting to use the contributions deducted from the salaries of the members of the working population.

These different developments are a new expression of a timeless reality, namely that both in the most traditional societies and the most developed societies, well-being in old age is a question of intergenerational solidarity.

Although the social protection of the aging improved significantly in all the regions of the world, especially during the last two decades, the situation in the last few years has become alarming.

With economic recession, inflation and the rise in unemployment, the advances made in the number of individuals protected and the level of benefits have given way to stagnation and menacing regression. In the long term, in view of the demographic trends, it is feared that the increasing proportion of the older population will become too heavy a burden for the working population.
In the light of the urgency created by an unfavorable evolution, seeking to strengthen achievements in the industrialized countries and to look for new alternatives in the developing countries, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - All aging persons, at a specified age, be provided with a minimum old age pension financed from taxation,

B - A system of pension schemes be introduced, with a view to bringing post-retirement income closer to activity income, to be financed by employer and employee contributions in such a way as to give the worker a share of responsibility for his retirement,

C - Upward readjustment of the income thus guaranteed be provided for, which would reflect the solidarity between generations by sharing the country's wealth between workers and retired persons,

D - Programmes be set up which would take into account the special requirements of the aging who are disabled,

E - The bilateral or multilateral international conventions be generalized, which are intended to co-ordinate the validation of periods of professional activity and ensure the transfer of benefits due from one country to another,

F - Old age policies enable aging workers best to reconcile their right to rest and their right to work by:

- in all countries, the abolition of laws, regulations, customs or practices which have the effect of forcing a person, against his will, to terminate his professional activity,

- encouraging the trade-associations and trade-unions to reconsider their policy on employment and retirement from active life, and to give special attention to the increasing proportion of people suddenly out of work by the age of fifty in some countries,

- adapting working conditions to the aging worker: gradual retirement, part-time work, eligibility for partial old age pension.
THE REDISTRIBUTION OF TIME AND LIFELONG EDUCATION

A human being's life continuously develops through alternating rest and activity phases, which vary according to the development of the individual and the nature of his activities. The distribution of time over the life-span changes considerably from one society to another, according to both the total length of the life cycle and the prevailing type of activity in these societies.

Despite this diversity, the increase in life expectancy creates a growing amount of free time that the general trend towards industrialization is seeking to make profitable by work.

In the rural societies, the distribution of time is mainly linked to the rhythm of seasons, agriculture and stockbreeding. This is a fairly flexible and tolerant distribution and it makes possible continuity and integration of the various stages in life: childhood, youth, adult phase and aging, as well as a certain self-regulation of the activity and rest alternating sequences.

The move towards an industrial society gives importance almost exclusively to productive working time, upon which the whole distribution of time is built: schooling and educational time, leisure and rest time, retirement time are only sub-systems depending on the working time system. The transition was gradual, from a personal and natural distribution of time to an anonymous and rigid one.

Confining education to childhood, working during the prime of life and spending a prolonged old age in pensioned idleness, making no contribution to society, would appear to be a squandering of human resources. Education, work, leisure and free time need to be reconsidered and rearranged in a global, harmonious and flexible approach that takes into account the diversity and differences existing between individuals, societies and cultures, while conserving their fundamental and unique values.

Education should form the basis for any aging policy for, by, with and concerning the aging. Life-long education is not merely a means of acquiring knowledge, skills, cultural and spiritual enrichment and personal advancement, but also of acquiring the ability to cope with and participate in the events of daily life.
Considering that educational development should be regarded as an economic necessity and a right for all human beings, ranging from literacy to preparation for specific stages of life, such as retirement and aging, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - Governments and community organizations (including trade unions, firms and ideological and religious organizations) take part in the development of education at all stages of life; encouragement be given to the development of cultural and life-long education centres that are readily accessible to members of the community and to which the aging could make a contribution based on their knowledge and experience of life.

B - Educational institutions of all kinds, as well as the mass media, be encouraged to project a positive image of the aging and their active role in society and to assist the aging in developing their creativity and spiritual awareness involving the various generations in a spirit of mutual understanding.

C - Recognizing the special role that the aging can play - and continue to play in certain societies, more particularly those that have preserved oral traditions - in a variety of fields, including education, community organization and the transmission of skills and the arts, the participants strongly emphasize the need to involve the aging as one of the resources in the process of education and cultural development, both for their own good and for that of society as a whole.

D - Since some countries have preserved a better approach to the integration of and respect for the aging (third world countries) and others have greater material and financial resources (the industrialized countries), a mutual transfer of resources and knowledge should be encouraged in this area. Research should be undertaken at the international level, by international organizations such as UNESCO, to bolster the development of educational strategies and practices on behalf of the aging, so that the results can be disseminated among different cultures.

E - The aging be involved, either individually or through their representative bodies, in the organization and use that may be made of their free time, and that care be taken that social tourism does not become a form of industrialized tourism which is detrimental to the aging and reinforces social inequalities.

F - In order to make use of volunteer capacities, guidelines be developed on the status of volunteers, especially when such work may compete with a paid working activity and when the problem of reimbursement of expenses resulting from voluntary work is raised.

G - The aging may be the beneficiaries of voluntary work, but also the protagonists in all areas of social and educational activities at all the stages in community and individual life.
THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF THE AGING

A changing ecology does not only affect the aging, it has an effect on society as a whole, and in this sense it carries a vital aspect of prevention.

Based on the search for a better life for older people, these considerations have direct and indirect effects on the well-being of all, and here is highlighted one of the positive contributions of the social value of this age group, which is a reflection of our future.

We must never forget that aging populations are very heterogenous from one country to another, that cultural traditions are considerably diversified, that «ecology» itself, living conditions, carry the weight of their own history, that the various societies present complex phenomena (increasing urbanization, implications of technological progress...). However, there are, beside the varying approaches, overall concepts, fairly similar trends and issues concerning concrete action for the elderly.

Too many people surrender to their environment. Others abandon it, in search for something offering greater, yet unrealized hopes. The elderly often feel too fragile or inadequate to cope with - let alone alter - their environment. They must be encouraged and helped to determine and improve it in finding the means to change one's own life all through to death.

We have created a world where noise, violence and set values tend to desorientate the elderly, as well as isolating them from much of the mainstream of life. Urban planning, land use policies, transportation and communication systems, the design of dwellings and leisure facilities, the expansion of formal and informal education opportunities, all these (and others) are aspects which largely determine the environment in which people live. They should be planned and decided upon with the participation of the elderly themselves.
**HOUSING AND TRANSPORT**

The majority of people aged 65 and over want to and do live at home as long as possible.

Their home plays an important role; it stands for an autonomous management of one's life; when mobility decreases, it becomes the focus point in one's world.

However, in numerous cases, private houses are still of substandard level. Both in urban and in rural areas, there remain many obstacles to a more human life.

To these deficiencies can be added difficulties with moving: uneasy access to administrative and shopping centres and to public transport, lack of safety in the streets, traffic hazards to drivers and pedestrians.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

**A** - Far greater imagination be applied to the design and usage of housing, and the numerous studies made on the elimination of «architectural barriers» be continued and their application generalized. In many instances, these applications would entail no extra investment. Technological means (communication with the outside world, improvement of road signs) must be used, especially in urban areas.

**B** - The wish to live at home be promoted by graduated escorting action according to the degree of isolation and physical or mental dependency.

**C** - When collective housing is the last resort, whether in a medical institution or not, the possibility be offered in a familiar environment.

**URBANIZATION AND RURAL DEPOPULATION**

The phenomena of increasing urbanization have had for the elderly a certain number of damaging effects, such as:

- *For those living in towns*

  The most vulnerable among them are affected by acknowledged urban factors, such as: concentration of marginal conditions, development of violence, loss of identity, solitude, to which must be added high living costs, imbalances in prosperity, the degradation of buildings.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

**A** - Governments, official bodies and NGO's alike give greater attention to creating social awareness at community level. The local community is a neglected focal point for developing motive forces to implement improvements in the quality of life for all, including elderly.
Particularly at the local level - municipality or neighbourhood - can old people best participate in the decision-making process. The development of the latent potential in local communities is vital to the creation of better living environments whether in the context of industrialized nations or of the less developed countries.

For those who remain in rural areas

Rural communities throughout the world witness a decrease in population numbers with the migration of young, economically active people towards the towns and high-employment centres.

These migrant populations leave behind them little groups of aging or aged people whose skills often do not correspond any longer to modern life requirements, in particular to new agricultural technologies.

In the developing countries in spite of the urbanization process, most of the population's activity takes place in rural areas.

So far, the weakening of traditional organization and social protective measures has rarely been offset by a corresponding extension of the national social security cover to a greater number of population groups.

In addition to the frustration which unequal levels of social security generate, they can give rise to phenomena including massive out-migration towards more favoured sectors of the economy; the process of socio-economic development as a whole may suffer from this, and the aging are among its first victims.

In view of these problems, all the more important because they are continuously changing, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - Interest and activity centres be decentralized diversified and developed, and mobility facilitated for the population as a whole.

B - Multi-disciplinary rural services be set up - on a mobile basis in less populated areas, in charge of information, education, prevention and medical and social assistance.

C - On the basis of an analysis of the requirements and characteristics of the rural world, transitory solutions be tried, which would integrate the experience gained in the industrialized countries but would avoid the pitfalls they have met.

WORKING CONDITIONS AND ENVIRONMENT

Time profitability needs have led to an internal organization of working time, applying cycles and standards that are more and more artificial, intermittent and restricting in relation to unchanging biological cycles and rhythms.
Acknowledging that the constraints resulting from working and living conditions have an increasingly heavy bearing on aging and that it is necessary to reintegrate work into the living and developmental environment, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - Greater attention be drawn to the implementation of ILO Resolution 162 and of a Code of Practice providing the elderly with totally equal opportunities of employment and freedom of choice as to their retirement age, in particular:

- that individual capacities and their evolution through life be taken into account,
- that all kinds of relaxing, distributing and reorganizing working hours be implemented rapidly,
- that the age of retirement be neither an absolute and final element, nor an excuse for the present situation,
- that short- and medium-term credit systems be set up and the studies made on the subject be brought to the employers' and employees' unions' attention,
- that the transition from active life to retirement be not only dealt with by last-minute information, but by an early preparation in permanent education programmes.
THE NEEDS OF THE AGING IN THE AREAS OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Health care is a fundamental human right. Access to health and social services based on need, not on level of income, is essential if this is to be a reality for old people. Positive discrimination may be necessary to achieve a fair share of high quality care for old people in many countries.

It is essential to identify as early as possible those at risk of losing their independence; early intervention in primary health care before crises develop will often enable the elderly to remain in their own homes whenever possible.

Generally speaking, in-home services to old people (home help, visiting nurses, home improvement assistance) may be invaluable for the maintenance of «supported autonomy»; they can prevent inappropriate institutionalisation and are generally cost-effective in the long term.

Old people must have immediate access to hospital and other institutional care when needed with a full range of diagnostic and treatment facilities for acute and chronic conditions.

When isolated elderly persons become chronically infirm and can no longer look after themselves, they must be provided with care in institutions, situated close to the family and within the local community. Standards of all institutions designed for old people must be as high as those for other populations, often with specific additional features.

The aged are particularly at risk of mental disorders including depression and confusional states. The risk may be alleviated by the setting up of preventive mental health services including positive psychological preparation for life changes (retirement, for instance) and for predictable stress and by the creation of counselling services for families caring for old people.

Health information and education for the aged which encourage healthy life-styles (e.g. regular exercise, good nutrition, problems of smoking and alcohol abuse) are essential. Although people should be made aware that sickness is not an integral part of the ageing.
process and must be encouraged to seek medical help when necessary, they must also be given information on the use and promotion of prescriptive and non-prescriptive drugs and knowledge of the danger of over-medication.

The effectiveness of a health policy must result from reliable scientific information on the physical, physiological, psychological and social aspects of aging.

Basic, social, behavioural and bio-medical research must come before applied research including the analysis of social policies and programmes, epidemiological studies and an evaluation of alternative mechanisms for the delivery of services.

On the basis of the above-mentioned principles, the Non Governmental Organizations recommend that:

A - Each country take appropriate action to guarantee access to health and social services for old people. These must be of a quality comparable to those offered to other groups.

B - Each government should make it a priority to develop and support decentralized non-institutional health and social service programmes, in cooperation with appropriate NGO's.

Early intervention in primary care directed to individual old people and their caring families, should draw upon existing networks of support and old people themselves, and possibly be supported by trained and specialized personnel.

C - Each government should aim to provide a comprehensive range of domiciliary services as a humanitarian and effective method of supporting old people, their families and neighbourhoods, and providing personal care, nutrition and social interaction. To be effective, these must be backed by adequate day care, hospital, and short-term residential accommodation, according to the needs.

D - Each nation must introduce national policies and programmes for the provision of adequate mental health care for the aged, including preventive community-based counselling and long term care for those patients with severe chronic mental disorders.

E - Each country should ensure that on the one hand social and health services be provided and implemented in cooperation with Non Governmental Organizations and other countries; on the other hand, that appropriate services and knowledge be made available which will lead to the promotion of health and prevention of disease for old people, including on-going information on proper nutrition, avoidance of health hazards and appropriate use of medicines.

F - All countries (either individually or collectively) should undertake the development and implementation of comprehensive programmes of basic and applied research regarding ageing and the aged.
AGING WOMEN

Whichever aspect of aging we may be considering, it seems that being a woman is an aggravating factor.

Because of excess male mortality, the majority of older persons throughout the world are women. Widowhood, as well as the survival of single and divorced women, increases the risk of isolation.

As they live longer, they tend to live more frequently in three- or four - generation families; their children are themselves either retired or deceased. Many of them, therefore, when they cannot live independently any longer, have to depend on external assistance or collective housing.

The aging women’s precarious lives are also the result of their family and working past. Those who have devoted their lives to their family, to the upbringing of their children and to the care to their aged parents, remain without a personal pension and are not entitled to assistance benefits. Others have not been able to adequate perfectly their private and family life with their working life, too often devoted to subordinate tasks interrupted by pregnancies.

Improving the fate of women is therefore considered a priority by the Non Governmental Organizations in the policy for the aging and they recommend that public recognize that:

A - It is mainly because of the economic segregation of women throughout their lives that they appear in old age as the poorest among the poor in developed and developing countries.

B - The amount of time requested for domestic daily tasks and the inequitable share of responsibilities assumed by women for the elderly within the family, prevents them from having other activities and leisure time.

C - The interruption or sharp decrease in retirement benefits on the spouse’s decease or after a divorce constitutes a serious deficiency of social legislation which can place older women in a critical economic situation.
CONCLUSION

Although one can rightly argue that part of the support network for older people reflects ideological beliefs regarding the distribution of wealth and the sharing of responsibilities, it is nonetheless a measure of the capacity of a country to provide assistance to those entitled to it; in other words, generous principles can only be translated into concrete action within the limits of available resources.

The question arising therefore seems to relate to the need for an interconnection of the two vital leads that the Non Governmental Organizations and the delegates to the World Assembly are trying to follow in their search, defined as humanitarian and developmental problems.

Naturally, none of the means necessary to check the increase in financial burden of the community must be spared; all these means were listed in the various chapters of the report, prevention, self-care, support from the family, voluntary work and participation from the elderly themselves. The Non Governmental Organizations are aware of their role and of the efforts that remain in order to draw from mankind’s potential and Nature the means necessary to improve the quality of life.

But the participants to the Forum recognized with sadness the fact that very little of the achievements of efforts on the part of nations are redirected to the citizens’ well-being.

Considering that the arms race and the proliferation of armament expenditures can be found throughout the world, both in developed and developing countries, they urge that military expenditures be reduced, in particular on nuclear weapons, part of the “savings” thus achieved be reallocated to old age policies and until disarmament is achieved, credits be immediately redistributed into all categories of budgets.

Convinced of the necessary solidarity of all mankind in order to eradicate poverty from the world and prohibit social injustice, they urge that the governments of the industrialized countries support the international Non Governmental Organizations in their action in favour of the less developed nations. Action not only in favour of the aging populations, but in favour of all populations which, when they are young today, will tomorrow live a happier old age. The Non Governmental Organizations have therefore unanimously expressed the wish that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, if he so desires, convey the conclusions of the World Assembly on Aging to the World Assembly of Youth.