

Voluntary Action by Older Persons

Robert Leigh

“Create an enabling environment for volunteering at all ages, including public recognition, and facilitate the participation of older persons who may have little or no access to the benefits of engaging in volunteering.”

(Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002)

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 counseling, mentoring, child-care, peer care, end-of-life care or community leadership, political involvement or role model figures. Such non-monetary endeavors 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 encouraging the fullest participation of older people in society.

There are at least two facets to the case in favor 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, counseling, 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-focused recognition criteria. The dearth of information on this contribution has fueled the stereotyping

Robert Leigh, Chief of UNV Representation Office in North America, is an economist with an M.A. from University College, London. He has worked in several country offices of the United Nations Development Programme and is currently the Chief of the New York office of the United Nations Volunteers which is headquartered in Bonn, Germany. Tel: 212-906-3638; Fax: 212-906-3659; e-mail: robert.leigh@undp.org or visit www.unvolunteers.org and/or www.iyv2001.org

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 This was further looked into at the Second World Assembly on Ageing with the inclusion of a specific reference in the outcome document to volunteering by older persons.

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 favorable 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 defense 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 channeled 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 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.

Building upon the previous discussions and resolutions on volunteering, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002, adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, highlights the economic, political and social contributions older persons make through volunteering, the reciprocal benefits to older persons that accrue from voluntary action, and the importance to facilitate an enabling environment for older persons to remain active through this form of citizen engagement.

Recognition of volunteering in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 is important. Giving explicit economic, social and moral value to older peoples' voluntary contributions to their communities and nations now needs to be addressed further. Governments and other development actors need to be in a position to make the correct choices in their strategies to combat poverty, exclusion, conflict, and discrimination if policy measures for preserving a society for all ages and generations are to be truly inclusive.

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.

ENDNOTES

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

² A/RES/56/38