



THE NGO COMMITTEE ON AGEING

BUILDING A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES



Welcome to the January 2024 Issue of the UN NGO Committee on Ageing/NY Newsletter

What's in this issue?

This month's issue is devoted to the considerations surrounding poverty and ageing. We begin with a message from our new Chairperson, Dr. William T. Smith, Ph.D. followed by updates from Editor Martha Bial, then Maud Bruce-About taking a **Deeper Dive** into the incidence of poverty among older adults worldwide and a fresh look at "Sustainable Longevity" in **Words That Are Trending** by Adriane Berg.

A Message From Our New Chairperson

My name is William [Bill] Smith, and I am the new chair of the NGO CoA. My background includes three degrees in Social Work, the last being my doctorate from Fordham University in Social Work, with a concentration in Gerontology.

I have been active throughout the years with the NGO CoA and participated in all the Open-Ended Working Groups, advocating for a global Convention on the Rights of Older Persons for the past fourteen years. My experience includes working as the President/CEO of Aging in America, Inc. and focused on domestic public policy matters. I am the main representative to the United Nations on behalf of the International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing, which is ECOSOC accredited and is now doing business as the Global Ageing Network. GAN is now present in over fifty countries throughout the world.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Cynthia Stuen for her magnificent performance as the previous chair and now the past chair of the NGO CoA. She has been an incredible mentor to me and will continue in numerous important roles as Past Chair. I will continue to rely heavily on her and her great depth of knowledge about the United Nations, as well as the global issues which must be addressed. This is all about the work of Civil Society, and we need all of you to assist in this important effort.

The Executive Committee Members, whom Cynthia introduced to you in the last issue of the newsletter, are simply the best and most talented individuals any chair could wish for. From expertise on the functioning of the UN to critical issue areas such as Poverty, Elder Abuse, Gerontological and Intergenerational Issues, Women's concerns, Health, and Housing issues, to name just a few.

There is no paucity of issues that will guide the work of your NGO CoA Executive Committee. You, as Members, are vital to the success of our Mission.

For example, on December 13, 2023, an important program, "Identifying the Vital Role that Civil Society Plays in Advocating for Realizing Human Rights," was held in New York City as part of the 75th Anniversary of the UDHR and Human Rights Day. It was a collaborative effort on behalf of the NGO Committee on Human Rights and the NGO Committee on Ageing/NY.

In addition, Rio Hada from the High Commissioner on Human Rights addressed the OHCHR 75th anniversary outcomes and the path forward. Mr. Edwin Walker, Deputy Assistant Secretary, US Administration for Community Living, HHS, provided a Perspective from a Member State.

Working together, we can achieve much. Thank you, Civil Society.

LOOKING AHEAD and LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD

By Martha Bial, Editor and Chair of the NGO COA Communications Committee

The Commission for Social Development (CSocD) will be meeting at the UN headquarters in New York from February 5th through the 14th while the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will meet from March 11th through the 22nd. In-person registration has closed for both commissions, but you can view the open sessions of both on UN web TV by date ([UN Web TV](#)) As the time approaches, lists of sessions and topics will be available on the websites of both commissions.

Both CSocD and CSW will focus on poverty reduction this year. In our current issue Maud Bruce-About (**Deeper Dive**) and Adriane Berg (**Words That Are Trending**) provide background material to help us better understand what's at stake in these UN deliberations.

LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD: The Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing What You CAN Do Now

OEWGA, has recently been meeting in April, but going forward will hold its 14th session from May 20—24, 2024, at the UN in New York. After last year's session, Brazil and Portugal were appointed to facilitate discussion among member nations on the gaps in current UN protections for the rights of older people. They are charged with formally identifying the gaps and making recommendations to the full OEWGA in May for how to address those gaps.

Possibilities range from recommending a new Convention on the Rights of Older Persons to asking for further study to dissolving the OEWGA without further action. The aging-focused NGOs are strongly behind a Convention, and most want the UN to start drafting one.

Action Call: If you share this view, here are some steps you can take:

- Sign the petition being circulated by GAROP Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People. You can sign as an individual; organizational affiliation is not required here. [GAROP Petition](#)

- At Major UN Meetings, such as CSocD, CSW, and OEWGA, submit written statements or oral interventions from the floor asking for a legally binding Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons. These can only be submitted on behalf of NGOs accredited to ECOSOC (Such statements can also be circulated through your networks so they can become more aware of the importance of this issue]
- Watch our website for further updates on Why We Need a Convention: <https://ngocoa-ny.org/>

No time to read these great articles? Find them along with back issues on our website.

ngocoa-ny.org

And while you are there...

You can pay your 2024 dues **NOW** and be credited with paid membership through December 2024! Pay online or get directions for mailing a check.

Thank you.



A DEEPER DIVE: The Big Slideback: Poverty Levels Are Increasing Among the World's Older People

By Maud Bruce-About, UN Representative, International Federation of the Association of Older People (FIAPA)

The UN Commission for Social Development - 5 - 14 February - and the UN Commission on the Status of Women - 11 - 24 March will focus on Poverty.

Here's why!

According to the [Sustainable Development Progress Report](#), we are going backward in gains made against poverty. *"Cascading and interlinked crises are putting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in grave danger, along with humanity's very own survival." The world is seeing years of progress in poverty and hunger eradication vanish.*

To prepare you for the upcoming Commissions, this article will first draw a broad picture of poverty and inequality and then provide a deeper understanding of the situation of older persons, especially older women.

Poverty by the Numbers

Currently, [1.1 billion out of 6.1 billion](#) people live in acute multidimensional poverty. In light of this crisis, the UN has announced that the [2025 World Social Summit](#) aims to regain commitment to the social dimensions of the SDGs.

The Social Commission will concentrate on adapting social policies relating to poverty within the context of other global and societal trends - societal ageing,

climate change, adverse effects, and the economic, political, and societal polarization that menace social cohesion. CSW will pivot around poverty as a barrier and how changing gender perspectives - in institutional setups and financing - can accelerate gender equality and empowerment.

Ageism Pits Young Against Old Instead of Focusing on the Age-Continuum

The number of persons aged 65 years or more will reach 1.6 billion and account for 16 percent of the world [population in 2050](#). Thus, to be fair and frank, the young today and tomorrow constitute the older people of the future.

Our starting view is that longevity should not become the privilege of the wealthy and that pitting generations against each other is ageist, counterproductive, and steers attention from more critical inequalities.

Hence, member states' policy should favour all their population's chances of not falling into poverty throughout the life course and provide sufficient safety nets if they do - all in line with the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and its covenants.

Sadly, the idea that future generations should not pay the consequences of actions by present generations - fair and appropriate in the climate context - has spilled over into the field of ageing, making discussions not only ageist but also diverting attention from other barriers to secure, just, free and harmonious societies capable of providing [higher standards of living for all](#).

Ageism pits age groups against each other and because the focus on the cost side - health care and pensions - hides the contribution of older persons to Sustainable Development and disregards the potential positive income of a Silver- or Longevity Economy, as discussed in our [April 2022 Newsletter](#).

Obsession with the cost-side of ageing and intergenerational equality hides more important economic inequalities that need to be addressed to avoid multidimensional poverty throughout the lifespan and an increased number of poor older persons in the future.

Inequality Risk-Lack of Equal Opportunity Wideness the Divide Between the Have and Have Nots in the Face of Other Crises

Inequality risks are *"widening disparities in both health and life expectancy among future [cohorts of older persons](#)."* as bases for discrimination and exclusion intersect and accumulate throughout life.

If not reversed, inequality will define the conditions of both present and future generations. Crises - be it war, pandemics, effects of climate change, or adverse trends in employment and wages - partially due to digitalization, AI, and new business models that favour some stakeholders over others, and the absence of market regulation and fairer fiscal policies - both national and global - are making successive generations increasingly unequal and economically insecure in both developed and developing countries.

The 2022 Inequality Report indicates that while inequalities between countries decreased over the last two decades, inequality has increased within most countries since the 1980s - following deregulation and liberalization programs - and are now greater than inequalities between countries.

It is important to note that some [high-income countries are highly unequal](#) - like the US - while others are relatively equal - like Sweden. This internal

economic disparity also exists among low- and middle-income countries.

The world's billionaires accumulate increased wealth. Since 1995, their share of wealth has risen from 1% to over 3%, with 2020 marking the sharpest increase ever noted. Hence, today, the richest 10% earn 52% of global income, whereas the poorest half earns 8.5% of it, the richest 10% own 76% of all wealth, and the poorest half possess merely 2% of the total.

Notable is that even when wealth inequalities within countries shrank from the early 20th century to 1980, [the bottom 50% share was always between 2% and 7%](#) of the total and even lower in some regions.

So, while over the past 40 years, the net worth of most nations' private citizens has grown, less money is in government hands for distribution to those in need. Governments have become poorer in that the share of wealth held by public actors is now close to zero or negative in rich countries, with the totality of wealth held in private hands, a trend aggravated during COVID-19.

Furthermore, employment is increasingly recognized as "*not the silver bullet to in-work poverty*," as hoped at the [1995 World Summit of Social Development](#). [According to the OECD](#), 8% of persons living in households with at least one worker were poor before COVID-19, and about 25% were poor in households with two or more workers.

Additionally, [EU research points](#) to the - partially political - difficulty of welfare states to support the lowest income groups that became relatively poorer between the financial crisis and Covid-19. In 2021, 95.4 million Europeans risked poverty or social exclusion.

Carbon emission is not a WEALTHY vs. UNDER RESOURCED issue, as there are high emitters in low- and middle-income countries and low emitters in rich countries. Worldwide, the top 10% of emitters are responsible for nearly 50% of all emissions, while the bottom 50% produce 12%.

By region, in Europe, the bottom 50% of the population emits around five tonnes per year per person, the top 10 % 29 tonnes; in North America, the bottom 50% emits around 10 tonnes, the top 10% 73 tonnes; in East Asia, the bottom 50% emits around three tonnes and the top 10% 39 tonnes. The poorest half of the population in rich countries is already at (or close to) the 2030 climate targets set by the rich countries, when expressed on a per capita basis. ([World Inequality Report 2022](#))



Poverty is Gendered

[Poverty is gendered](#), as progress in equal wages for women has been slow and uneven over the last 30 years. Overall, women's share of total labor income neared 30% in 1990 and now stands at less than 35%.

Among older women, poverty levels tend to be higher than among older men; with longer life expectancies, women are more likely to be widowed, and they have shorter working careers and lower wages - in the informal or formal care sector - as they carry most caregiving and domestic duties [and hence also end up earning lower pensions.](#)

Even when pensions are available at retirement, women constitute 65% of the 33% globally that do not receive any pension; women are disadvantaged under current contributory and private pension systems favoring continuous, full-time employment. Older migrants cannot obtain their benefits with employment spread geographically. As an illustration, while the EU gender pay gap is 14.1%, the average gender pension gap is 37.2%. In 2019, 23% of women 75+ in the EU lived in poverty or social exclusion.)

In [76 of 190](#) countries studied, women face legal obstacles to building wealth in addition to lower wages and low or no pensions as their property rights are restricted.

With longer life expectancies than men, [women also run a more significant risk of age-related disabilities](#) than their male counterparts and hence need long-term care and have less social protection to cover these needs.

Unfortunately, while COVID-19 has confirmed that universal solid health systems and policies underpin both health and financial security and resilience, many countries where the number of older persons grows the fastest do not have solid systems in place. [In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia](#), less than 25% of eligible people receive a pension. Older women are again exposed to exclusion/limitations in access to social security, financial resources, property ownership, and inheritance rights.

It is easy to infer from the above that policy measures are needed for gender equality - all along the life course - and to combat poverty and improve economic security in the interest of all women of all ages - an older woman is only an aged version of her younger self with the inequalities and discriminations that have compounded throughout her life - and all men.

It is Difficult To Get all the Facts on the Poverty Levels of Older People and to Reconcile Disparities

To be noted is the complexity of poverty assessment - surveys relying on household income fail to account for resource allocation in multigenerational households. Older people are often excluded from the formal and informal work markets and depend on other or less secure sources of income (even begging) for survival.

As for the comparison between old persons and other population segments, current statistics indicate that [older persons are worse off overall](#) - 13.5 percent of 65+ individuals in the OECD countries live in relative income poverty (income below half the national median equalized household disposable income). In contrast, the average overall population is 11.8 percent, according to OECD statistics.

However, on a country level, the situation is diverse.

In twenty out of 36 OECD countries, the old-age income poverty rate is lower than the rate for the entire population - e.g., Spain - in Finland, poverty rates are identical. In 15 OECD countries, older people are still more likely to be [income-poor](#) than the total population. In G20 countries - outside the OECD -

poverty rates among the 65+ population are high in China (39 percent) and India (23 percent) while lower than the total poverty rate of [20 percent in Brazil](#).

Conclusion

Worldwide, 142 million older persons could not meet their basic needs in 2020 - before COVID-19 - according to [the World Health Organization Baseline Report](#). Conflicts and economic downturns have since made matters worse.

Whether out of choice or necessity, in 2019, before the pandemic, [28 percent of men and 13 percent of women ages 65+](#) participated in the labor force.

In low-income countries - where the host of the 33% of the global population that does not receive any pension live - the share of persons 65+ working in low-income countries was 56 percent for men and 33 percent for women.

Striking - but not surprising - is [that 78 percent of older people work in the informal sector](#).

What is also needed is recognition of Older Persons' contribution to society, protection of their rights, and the unraveling of ageism - which is why we support the Convention for the Rights of Older Persons.

Ageism is not only a cause of depression and bad health, but it also stops older persons from accessing capabilities and opportunities to contribute to society:

- [The Global Report on Ageism](#) released in 2022 by the World Health Organization found that one in two people is ageist.
- The Fourth Review and Appraisal of the [Madrid International Plan of Action](#) on Ageing (MIPAA) pointed to age-based institutional discrimination, attitudes, and practices and highlighted issues with implementing a national framework.

Only without ageism can our economies and societies benefit from longevity!!

Words that Are Trending

Sustainable Longevity: A Human Right or a Healthcare Goal

By Adriane Berg, UN Representative IFA, HOST: On the Ground Podcast of the U.N. Global NGO Executive Committee



Sustainable longevity, often framed as extending human lifespan or as a demographic shift towards older populations, has been a persistent trend since the 1800s. Historically, the quest for increased longevity has been tied to clean water, sanitation, and infectious disease prevention advancements. Today, geroscientists are exploring the possibility of preventing aging altogether.

However, the discussion around sustainable longevity is incomplete without addressing its economic dimensions, particularly its connection to poverty. This

article advocates for nations to debate whether Sustainable Longevity is a human right or a healthcare goal and take action to realize Longevity Equity under its chosen rubric.

The Shift from Biological to Environmental and Lifestyle as Causes of Longevity

In October 2021, the Kitalys Institute Conference on Targeting Metabesity brought together geroscientists to discuss breakthroughs that could extend the human lifespan to 120 and beyond. Dr. Nir Barzilai and Dr. Matt Kaeberlein highlighted scientific advancements that could pave the way for healthier super-agers.

One hundred-plus lifespans do not seem farfetched when viewed against historical life expectancy. Estimates suggest that in the pre-modern world, life expectancy [was around 30 years](#) in all regions. In the US, it was 47 in 1900 and is 79 years old Today. ["No country in the world has a lower life expectancy than the countries with the highest life expectancy in 1800. Many countries that suffered from bad health not long ago are catching up rapidly."](#)

[At a recent Stanford University Centennial Conference, attendees discussed mapping the 100-year life and what it means to work, family, ageism, and personal attitudes toward ageing.](#)

The New Map of Life, Website of Standford University Center for Longevity, asserts: "Today's 5-year-olds will benefit from an astonishing array of medical advances and emerging technologies that will make their aging experience far different from that of Today's older adults. And while there is no way to stop the process of aging, the emerging field of geroscience has the potential to transform how we age by seeking to identify—and "reprogram"—the genetic, molecular, and cellular mechanisms that make age the dominant risk factor for certain diseases and degenerative conditions."

Yet, in the face of such optimism, it also behooves us to face the realization that such longevity is hindered by poverty, whether experienced throughout the life course or through personal financial decline in older age. We need to ask, which 5-year-olds will enjoy Sustainable Longevity? And if not all, or only a privileged few, is Sustainable Longevity a human right or a healthcare matter?

Economic Inequality and Sustainable Longevity

Although biological inequalities date back to the beginning of humankind, environmental inequality affecting longevity is recent. The historical connection between increasing life expectancy and inequality dates to the early 19th century. During the Age of Enlightenment, life expectancy grew in industrialized countries while lagging in the rest of the world, creating global health disparities. Though global inequality has decreased over the decades, significant gaps persist across and within countries. For instance, in 2019, the Central African Republic had a life expectancy of 53 years, while Japan's was 30 years longer.

So clear is the nexus between longevity and economic status that the [US Food and Drug Administration named "social determinants of aging"](#) as a cause of shortened lifespan and called for a health equity initiative. "Older adults with lower incomes are more likely to have disabilities and die younger.¹ In addition, disability is likely to start earlier in life for people with lower incomes — further raising the risk of early mortality."

Nevertheless, the US approach to these issues, as that of most nations, is one of healthcare policy rather than a human rights perspective. It remains to be asked what the position of the United Nations will be in drafting a Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons.

Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Longevity

The first Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations aims to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere." The [2030 Agenda](#) acknowledges that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development."

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, 189 countries unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration, pledging to *"spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty."* It then created a priority framework of several goals, which, implemented in the last twenty years, helped lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty.

The actions for poverty eradication include:

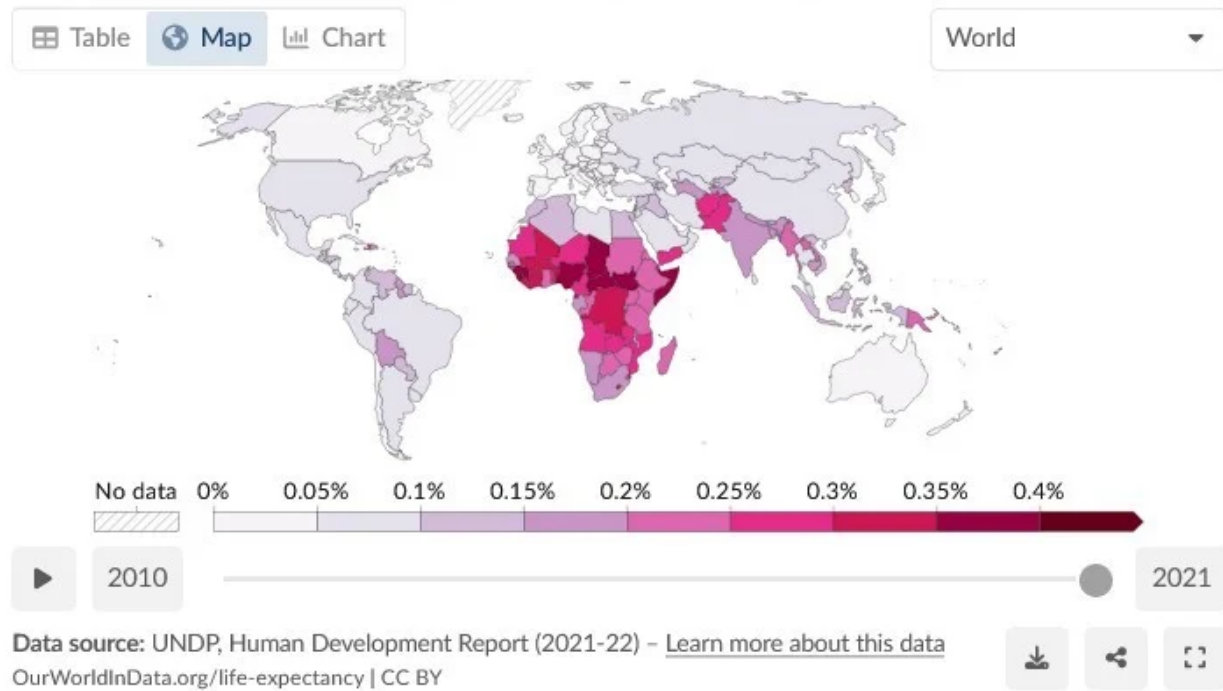
- Improving access to sustainable livelihoods, entrepreneurial opportunities, and productive resources.
- Providing universal access to essential social services.
- Progressively developing social protection systems to support those who cannot support themselves.
- Empowering people living in poverty and their organizations.
- Addressing the disproportionate impact of poverty on women.
- Working with interested donors and recipients to allocate increased shares of ODA to poverty eradication and

All the above are steps in achieving Sustainable Longevity. However, a distinct focus on Sustainable Longevity is missing. Yet, direct consideration is needed given the societal complexity of increasing lifespan. A few nations like Singapore and Britain specifically view increased longevity as a significant national benefit. In England, the All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Longevity strives to increase lifespan by five additional years by 2030 for all UK citizens.

The place of Sustainable Longevity as a national priority affects its people's actual longevity and healthy lifespan.

Inequality in life expectancy, 2021

The Atkinson index measures inequality on a scale from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate higher inequality. Inequality is measured here in terms of the number of years a newborn would live if age-specific mortality rates in the current year were to stay the same throughout its life.



The Unintended Consequences of Longevity Breakthroughs

"Globally, life expectancy has increased by more than six years between 2000 and 2019 – from 66.8 years in 2000 to 73.4 years in 2019. Healthy life expectancy (HALE) has also increased by 8% from 58.3 in 2000 to 63.7 in 2019 due to declining mortality rather than reduced years lived with disability. [In other words, the increase in HALE \(5.4 years\) has not kept pace with the increase in life expectancy \(6.6 years\).](#)"

This means that sustainable longevity may also be accompanied by sustained chronic diseases of aging for significant numbers of people, requiring a massive input of family effort, government resources, and personal determination.

The unintended consequence of breakthroughs in sustaining lifespan for people in need of care has created an Ageist backlash regarding the value of elders in societies with limited healthcare resources. "Life expectancy for patients with Alzheimer's disease typically ranges from three to twelve years but can be longer in some cases. Families are anxious to know what to expect and how to best plan for the time ahead in terms of finances, family caregiving, and how they want to live out their lives," [said Dr. Cullum, a neuropsychologist Investigator with the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute](#) who specializes in cognitive assessment. "

A Call for Consideration

There is more work to be done through coalitions between geroscience, regulatory agencies, human rights activists, and civil society to determine whether Sustainable Longevity will be treated as a fundamental human right or as a worthy societal goal, the pursuit of which shifts according to its cost and the value placed on the older population. So, once again, a nation's cultural perspective may be the final arbiter of whether longevity in its fullest length

will be supported by government health and economic policy alone or become an immutable and fundamental right.

At this crucial time, as the human rights of older persons are being considered for a new Convention, Sustainable Longevity must be discussed. While related to poverty and access to healthcare, it warrants separate articulation as a fundamental human right, with its pathway to protection and realization or as a subhead of healthcare coverage. Whatever is finally decided, The subject is well worth addressing in our quest for equity in something as fundamental as lifespan. The number of years one has on the planet is at stake for each of us.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights set a common standard for all people in all nations. However, it could not contemplate today's potential for a 100-year life. The document has stayed strong precisely because it can be expanded and adapted to changing societal needs. Considering longevity equity or sustainable longevity is relevant and central to the changing times.

Thank you for reading this issue of our newsletter. We welcome any feedback! Feel free to drop us a line [here](#).

To discover more about how you can be part of the dialogue and the solutions, visit ngocoa-ny.org/participate

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