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Reflections on 30th Anniversary of United Nations International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP) and 75th Anniversary of the United Nations

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The United Nations (UN) is 75 years old, therefore the UN is considered old by society's standard. But when the UN was created in 1945, the average life expectancy in US was 63 for men and 68 for women, and for less developed countries, far less. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a major achievement of the UN in 1948, states that "all human beings are entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration without regard to race, colour, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other Status." Notice that AGE is not mentioned so older persons were in the "other status" category. Ageing was not on the UN radar for many years. How did that come about?

On 14 December 1990, the UN General Assembly designated 1 October as the **International Day of the Elderly** (by resolution 45/106) and modified to **International Day of Older Persons** by the General Assembly (resolution 50/141) in 1995. The UN Principles for Older Persons were adopted in 1991 (by resolution 46/91).

This historical reflection allows time for only a few highlights of what happened during these past few decades, how the UNIDOP came about and significant milestones reached. I wish to dedicate and pay tribute to all the past and present CHAMPIONS for older persons. This tribute begins with Julia T. Alvarez, UN Agencies, particularly DESA, NGO Committees on Ageing leadership, Chairs/Co-chairs of all annual observances and all the Civil Society Organizations working in this space. Due to time limits, I shall single out only a few voices for this reflective journey.

The late Julia T. Alvarez was a critical voice that raised awareness of ageing issues at the UN. She was the Ambassador, Alternate Representative of the Dominican Republic to the United Nations and began her career in 1978 at the UN (her brother was the Ambassador and needed her help). Note this is one year after the birth of the NGO Committees on Ageing in New York, Geneva and Vienna. After years of lobbying for greater attention to ageing and global longevity changes, Julia Alvarez was instrumental in establishing the UN International Day of Older Persons in 1990

Alex Kalache, 1st President of ILC-Brazil (2012-present. knew Julia Alvarez very well particularly while he was still in London and when he participated in 2nd World Assembly on Ageing . He went on to be the Director of ageing programmes at WHO and continued to work closely with Julia Alvarez. Dr. Kalache referred to Julia as "A Giant, a great champion for older persons; she had passion, commitment and CHARISMA." He reminisced of how she would walk into a room of ambassadors and be quite capable of shaking her finger at them while reminding them what they must DO for older

persons. She even took the UN to task over its mandatory retirement policy at age 60. It is no wonder she earned the title of “Ambassador on Ageing” at the United Nations. Dr. Kolache also referenced people from AARP who were very helpful to Julia in raising awareness of issues of ageing internationally.

Charlotte Nusberg, former Coordinator of AARP International Activities and a former Secretary-General of IFA, related an interesting side story about the AARP founder, Ethel Percy Andrus who always thought there should be international involvement of older persons. As a result, AARP served as a catalyst for the founding of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) in 1973 and IFA was one of the first organizations to call for a World Assembly on Ageing. Vienna was the site for the first World Assembly on Ageing in 1982. It was Charlotte Nusberg who worked on a document for IFA titled, “Rights and Responsibilities of Ageing”. Charlotte took the document to Julia T. Alvarez to see how to get it adopted at the UN. Julia immediately said, “Rights” will not work but Principles will. In addition, according to Charlotte, it eventually lost “Responsibilities”....but this document became the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, adopted by General Assembly in 1991.

Alexandre Sidorenko was Head of the UN Programme on Ageing, first in Vienna as of 1988 and then in NY from 1993 to 2009. Dr. Sidorenko also served as Coordinator of the International Year of Older Persons and then coordinated the MIPPA planning. He recalled, “I reckon the observances of UNIDOP during the years of preparing for and celebrating the International Year of Older Persons in 1999 were of utmost importance.” He called out the positive fact that there were regular contacts between the UN Secretariat and the NGO Committees on Ageing and felt the CoA/NY was instrumental in connecting the UN to various partners in civil society, citing specific examples of AARP, FIAPA, HelpAge International, IAGG and IFA.

The fact that the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and opened up Central and Eastern Europe was an important historical remembrance by M.C. Terry Hokenstad, Professor Emeritus at Case Western Reserve. He noted those countries were ageing more rapidly and there was a thirst to enhance their educational infrastructure with a great interest in ageing. Professor Hokenstad served as co-chair of the of the US Planning Committee of the International Year of Older Persons (1999) The year was launched on UNIDOP (October 1 of 1998) with a theme of “Towards A Society for All Ages” with the keynote speech delivered by Secretary-General Kofi Anon. In the Secretary General’s speech he said, “We live in an age to which many labels have been attached: it is the post-cold war age, the post-industrial age, the Age of the Internet; and the age of globalization. He added one more that day,,,,,the age of LONGEVITY. He went on to say that “A Society for all Ages” does not caricature older persons as patients and pensioners, instead it is to see them as both agents and beneficiaries of development....it seeks a balance between supporting dependency and investing in lifelong development.”

Terry also served on the Independent Expert Committee working to develop Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPPA) which marked another major milestone-The 2nd World Assembly on Ageing and adoption of MIPPA in 2002.

This past decade leading up to 2020 involved some major milestones . The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) concluded in 2015 and planning was well underway earlier for the planning and adoption of the Sustaining Development Goals (SDGs) for 2016-2030.

Helen Hamlin, a former Chair of NGO CoA and a UN representative of IFA was Invited by AARP to celebrate their first observance of IDOP at their headquarters in Washington, DC which took place on 1 October 2013. Helen highlighted in a taped interview that day that the MDGs made no mention of older persons and how she was working hard with other stakeholders to educate Missions to the UN on the importance of including older persons in the process. She also emphasized the importance of working intergenerationally to accomplish a better society for all ages.

There certainly has been progress with the adoption of the SDGs, now referenced as Agenda 2030. Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 15 goals contain specific or implied references to older persons. That is great progress since the MDGs made no reference to ageing.

I think this Pandemic of COVID-19 which opened 2020, will certainly join the major historical events of our time. COVID-19 IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE. Older persons are the main victims of the COVID-19 but are not the main agents of its spread. We need to act to insure equality for older persons.

A timely quote from Alexandre Sidorenko's blog on "older persons in this pandemic."
" ...based on the international policy frameworks on ageing, such as MIPPA, older persons should be seen as contributors to the reestablishment and reconstruction of communities and the rebuilding of the social fabric following emergencies."

Yes, this pandemic changes the way we feel and address ageing, it deserves our attention and ACTION to insure the Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020-2030 can be realized and recognition that older persons' rights are HUMAN RIGHTS. My fear is that this Pandemic will delay progress to insure **No One Is Left Behind**.