

51st Session of the Commission for Social Development
Western Asian Statement to the High Level Panel on Ageing
New York, 7 February 2013

Mr./Madam Chairperson,

It gives me great pleasure to represent the Western Asia region in the High Level Panel on Ageing.

Let me start by underlining that the countries of Western Asia agree on the right of every person to age with security and dignity as stipulated in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. Let me also highlight the fact that the Arab culture views its older persons as a valuable resource for their families and communities, a source of cultural continuity and a repository of wisdom and knowledge.

Mr./Madam Chair,

Ageing as a process is still in its early stages in our region; however, demographic trends show that older persons are increasing both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total population. In fact, the absolute number of persons aged 65 and over more than doubled over the past three decades, increasing from 4.9 million in 1980 to 12.5 million in 2010, which corresponds to 4.1 per cent of the total population in the region. By 2050, the number of older persons is expected to increase to 64.7 million, representing 11.8 per cent of the total population. Of course, regional variations exist, with countries such as Lebanon and Tunisia ageing at a more rapid pace than other countries. Still, by 2050, older persons are projected to represent between 22 and 36 per cent of the total population in twelve out of the seventeen member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). Variations associated with gender also exist, with women representing the majority of the older population in Western Asia¹, as they tend to live longer than men.

¹ Except for the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, where the older male population exceeds the older female population.

The fact that ageing in the countries of the region is happening both at a faster pace and at lower levels of socio-economic development, when compared to countries such as those in Western Europe, adds to the urgency of the situation. This is leaving our countries with less time to adjust to the consequences of ageing populations, increasing already existing social, economic and health challenges in some countries and outstripping the capacity of mechanisms of social and welfare support. The demands posed by an ageing population are made more severe by such factors as resource scarceness, the absence of adequate social safety nets, the internal and international migration of young people, changing family structures from extended to nuclear and the effects of political upheaval, conflict and foreign occupation.

Although not a homogeneous group, and while the situation and circumstances of older persons in our region differ depending on the social and economic development level of countries, older persons share relatively similar socio-economic characteristics that affect their welfare and the quality and type of care made available to them. Such characteristics include: unequal access to services for older persons living in urban and rural settings; gender inequalities increasing the vulnerability of older women, and especially widows; low levels of education and high illiteracy rates; high incidence of poverty; and the inadequate coverage provided by pension and health insurance schemes leading to an involuntarily-extended participation in the labour force, mostly in the informal sector and agriculture. Consequently, policy makers need to plan in advance and create the right policy environment to be able to properly adjust and respond to the changes effected by the ageing phenomenon.

Mr./Madam Chair,

Our countries are aware of the challenges that an ageing population would pose and have committed themselves to the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Arab Plan of Action on Ageing to the Year 2012 by formulating policies that respond to these challenges. We have made progress on various fronts including through the establishment of national committees and specialized departments on ageing, extending the coverage of health insurance and social security schemes, and reducing taxation for older persons.

Nonetheless, our countries are faced with hurdles in the formulation of such policies, as well as in managing the implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes. ESCWA carried out a regional review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and identified a number of obstacles that are common to most countries in the region. They include but are not limited to: the scarcity of resources and competing priorities resulting in limited provisions of financing and human resources to address the issues older persons face; insufficient research on the needs of and issues of concern to older persons to inform policy formulation and to mainstream older persons' issues into development plans and programmes; and the absence of standards to assure the quality of services provided to older persons.

Indeed, caring for older persons is a moral duty and obligation and is rooted in our customs, traditions and religious values and principles. We should combine this concern, rooted in our culture, with a proactive development approach to dealing with older persons and to tackling issues of concern to them. This will strengthen the position of older persons as partners in the development process, guaranteeing their involvement in the identification of the challenges and difficulties they face as well as in influencing the development of policies that relate to them. We also believe it is important to strengthen existing institutional frameworks that address older persons' issues in order to prevent the fragmentation of efforts between different sectoral ministries. Fragmentation results in most instances in uncoordinated policies and programmes that do not target older persons per se and delays the integration of older persons into development processes.

Mr./Madam Chair,

The challenges are numerous, but can be largely overcome with the active participation of older persons, influencing and making decisions on matters that concern them and affect their well-being; the development of the right institutional framework to facilitate the formulation of adequate strategies and the integration of ageing issues into social, health and economic policies; and the establishment of the right coordination mechanisms among the various development actors.

We believe that the United Nations can play a central role in this process. In addition to raising awareness on the rights of older persons and on issues of

concern to them, the United Nations can provide a platform for promoting the exchange of best practice and experiences on the issue. The United Nations can further provide technical support and advice on undertaking research, and collecting and analyzing adequate data on older persons to help identify their needs, problems and challenges. We should also propose measures and formulate policies aimed at empowering older persons and enabling them to participate in and benefit from the development process. Finally, the UN can monitor and evaluate policies to better assess their development impact and take corrective measures as needed.

Mr./Madam Chair,

Notwithstanding that the ageing phenomenon presents major social, economic and health challenges to individuals, families and societies at large, what is important is how we choose to address these challenges using best practices and those aspects of our culture which promote the respect and care for older persons so as to maximize opportunities and minimize negative impacts for the benefit of older persons and society at large. As the ageing process is a lifelong process, our ultimate aim should be to “create a society for all ages” by investing in the development of individuals throughout the life course.

Thank you, Mr./Madam Chair.