



THE EUROPEAN YEAR FOR ACTIVE AGEING AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GENERATIONS 2012: WHAT DID WE DO AND THE NEXT STEPS

COMMISSIONER ANDOR

Europe is getting older

In recent years, the European Union and its Member States have faced an unprecedented financial and economic crisis together with its employment and social consequences. Government measures had to respond to financial but also social emergencies. At the same time, however, we also have to find the right answers to long-term challenges, such as Europe's demographic transformation. The European Year has provided a framework for this.

Today, Europeans are living longer and healthier than ever before. Since 1960, life expectancy has risen by eight years, and demographers predict a further five-year increase over the next five decades. This is a historic achievement and the most tangible sign of progress of our societies.

It also means, however, that the European Union is experiencing significant population ageing. By 2060 there would be only two European people of working age (15-64) for every person aged over 65, compared to a ratio of four to one today.

So the fact that people are living longer is good news, but it also brings challenges, and in particular for our welfare systems and solidarity between generations. Indeed, the rapidly growing number of older people is potentially seen as a heavy burden on younger people. Others are afraid that the younger generation will reduce its support to older people who will become increasingly poor. And many expect tensions between older and younger generations.

These negative scenarios are not inevitable, though. They neglect that older people have valuable skills and experience that allow them to make a significant contribution to society, from which also young people can benefit. They also neglect that people have strong personal ties across generations and that old and young care for each other.



Active ageing as a response to ageing societies

The challenges of ageing societies can be dealt with, if we offer more opportunities to older people to realize their full potentials. We need to create more work opportunities for older workers. Also, we need to enable older people to stay healthy for longer, and be active in their communities. They also need an environment where growing old does not mean becoming dependent on others. 'Active Ageing' has to become a reality for all so that we can remain in charge of our own lives much longer than today. This is why the aim of the European Year 2012 for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations was to enable people, as they grow older, to continue to contribute to the economy and society and to look after themselves.

Making active ageing happen is complex, though. This cannot be achieved by decree. It requires all levels of government, businesses and social partners, civil society, the media and individual citizens to adapt and to play their part in changing society to make it fit for an ageing population.

The European Year 2012

The European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012 developed a framework for action on the three dimensions of active ageing: employment, participation in society and independent living. It has been a major effort in communicating and raising awareness and in mobilising action in this area. The Eu-

ropean Year website was the central hub of all these activities (www.europa.eu/ey2012/).

The EU is one partner among many others who need to cooperate to make active ageing happen. Through the European Year, we wanted to get different players to get together and to commit to specific actions and goals during this year, so that we will see older people's opportunities improve tangibly. In that spirit, the European Year has been a shared effort. The European Union set up the EU website and introduced two action days. The first of them was *generations@school*, and took place around the 29th of April, which was designated, in 2008, as the European Day of Solidarity between Generations. The idea of *generations@school* is that schools invite older people into the classrooms to discuss with pupils about their respective experiences and expectations, to learn from each other and about each other and to explore what the generations could achieve together. The second action day was called *Seniorforce* and took place around October 1st. All around Europe, events were held to promote senior volunteering. There was also the Award Scheme in which inspiring practices promoting active ageing at the workplace, in the media, through local authorities or by actions of social entrepreneurs were recognized. All these initiatives could only succeed thanks to the very active involvement of national administrations and in particular the national coordinators of the European Year, and the civil society organisations that established, under the leadership of AGE

Platform Europe, a European stakeholder coalition.

Follow up to the European Year 2012

The European Year has now come to an end. As Commissioner responsible for it, I believe the topic we chose for the Year was the right one at the right time; and we can already see some good results.

By highlighting the contribution that older people make to society, this European Year has brought a positive change in the way people view ageing. The Year has contributed to changing the perception of older people and their contribution to the economy and society. Where we once saw the rise in the number of older people only as a problem, we now see older people as part of the solution. It has popularised the concept of active ageing in many countries.

These are first, and admittedly subjective impressions. It is too early to have a full assessment on what has been achieved during the European Year 2012, but there can be no doubt that it has mobilised a wide range of stakeholders across Europe. It gave rise to hundreds of events and initiatives at European, national, regional and or local level dealing with employment, social participation and independent living of older people. The European Year website present many of them.

Some Member States chose to focus on promoting employment among older people, while others concentrated on older people's participation in society and

independent living. Member States face different challenges, so it makes sense that they set their own priorities.

Let me give you some examples: Austria has adopted a new Federal Plan for Senior Citizens. Ireland has decided that every county will have its own programme for becoming age-friendly by the end of 2013. Poland has adopted a government programme to promote social activities involving older people. Belgium established a federal advisory council for the elderly. The European Year has been pivotal to the development in Wales of the first national integrated ageing well programme, which will start in 2013.

In addition, the EU Member States have developed together with the Commission the "Guiding Principles for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations", which were endorsed by the EU's Social Affairs Ministers on 6 December 2012. The Guiding Principles are addressed to Member States, regions and cities, companies and other relevant organizations which all have a role to play in further improving the conditions for active ageing over the coming years. The Guiding Principles do not tell the Member States and stakeholders what they have to do. That makes sense, because their needs are so diverse, as are the arrangements for responding to them. So it will be for the national governments, regions, cities, companies, trade unions and civil society organisations to apply the guiding principles according to their own situations and challenges. But they could play a useful basis for discussions between different authori-

ties and stakeholders on how to achieve in a concerted manner certain goals in relation to active ageing.

The European Year has taught us that promoting active ageing calls for integrated policy-making, involving many levels of government and departments and agencies responsible for many different policy areas. To facilitate this process, the Commission plans to offer financial support for the development of comprehensive active-ageing strategies through a call for proposals in early 2013.

Setting goals for integrated strategies and monitoring their success require good indicators. As part of the legacy of the European Year a new policy tool was developed, namely the Active Ageing Index (AAI). The AAI was developed in a joint project between the European Commission and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the European Centre for Social Policy and Reform in Vienna. The index will help the EU Member States to identify challenges and unrealized potentials and to monitor progress in the area of active ageing.

The first results show that the three countries that come at the top of the overall Active Ageing Index are Sweden, Finland and Denmark, followed by the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom. In contrast, most Central and Eastern European countries as well as Malta and Greece, are at the bottom and have much scope for further improvements and policy actions to promote active ageing outcomes. In each of the countries, there are differences in the results for

women and men, showing the need for more targeted and gender-sensitive policies.

Beyond the European Year 2012

Overall, I am convinced that this European Year has been a great success, but it is only a start. A lot more remains to be done in the coming years to promote active ageing and to improve the quality of life of older people. We need to build on the political momentum created and make sure that we follow up on this issue in the future. The Commission is keen to support the Member States and stakeholders engaged in various initiatives.

The role of the EU with regard to active ageing goes indeed far beyond the European Year. The EU deals with a wide range of policy areas, including employment, public health, information society, transport and social protection, which all have to contribute to active ageing.

As one of the initiatives for the coming years, the Commission is planning a joint project with the World Health Organisation (WHO) to set up a European Network of Age-Friendly Cities. This project should feed into the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing. The Partnership brings key stakeholders together with a view to overcoming potential barriers to innovation and increasing the average individual's healthy lifespan by two years by 2020.

Active ageing is also crucial to the success of the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Europe 2020 sets a number of targets, including achieving a 75% employment rate for people aged 20 to 64, and lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. Active ageing policy is critical for the sustainability of our pension systems, and thus to meeting those targets.

Pensions, as we know, are a thorny issue. Many people see the reforms being implemented across Europe as depriving them of hard-earned rights. But we have to come to terms with the fact that rising life expectancy and a shrinking working-age population demand some adjustment. Only by maintaining a good balance between the years we spend working and the years we spend in retirement can we ensure that we will have decent pensions at a reasonable cost.

The Commission presented its thinking on pension reform in a White Paper in February 2012. The general thrust has been translated into specific recommendations addressed to many Member States. Extending people's working lives is crucial to meeting the Europe 2020 employment rate target and balancing budgets in the long run. It means encouraging people to stay on the labour market longer and — most of all — enabling them to do so by improving their employability.

Of course, we also need to combat unemployment among young people and make it easier for them to get into the labour market. The European Social Fund can be very useful for promoting employment of young and older workers alike.

Social Investment

Tackling challenges like population ageing calls for innovative policy and practice. Many excellent examples of social innovation emerged during the 2012 European Year, which, I hope, has helped disseminate new ideas. Many social innovations promoting active ageing are already being tried and tested across the EU. The challenge is to scale them up.

Social innovation is also closely linked with social investment. The social investment approach recognises that social policy is a productive factor, and that it is necessary for economic development and employment growth. Social investment is based on the idea that social policy — implemented via well-designed, activating, flexible systems — can yield a high economic and social return. I intend to look at this in an ambitious social policy initiative at the beginning of 2013.

Overall, the European Year 2012 has been a great success, but it is just the beginning on our journey of making full use of the potential that ageing societies bring.

