

Ageing

– A time for justice and cohesion

Advancing the Well-being and Rights of
Older Persons

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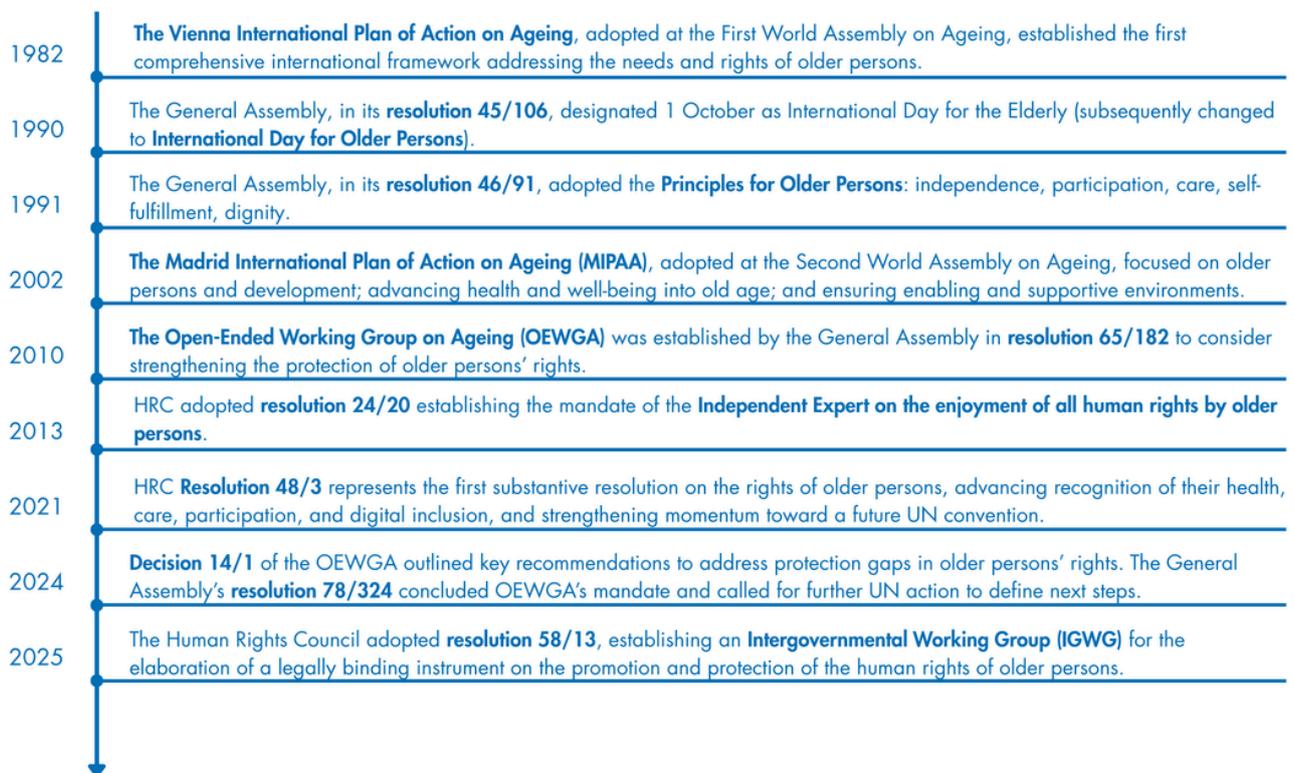
Thirty years after the first World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, this summit arrives at a critical juncture for the global social agenda. The promise made in 1995—to place people at the centre of development—remains urgent and unfinished. The world today faces a convergence of crises: accelerating climate change, growing inequality, geopolitical instability, and a decline in trust in public institutions. In this context, reaffirming the social dimension of sustainable development is essential to rebuilding a sense of common purpose and human solidarity. Among the most transformative global shifts of our time is population ageing. Once seen as a phenomenon confined to the industrialized North, it is now reshaping societies across every region. As of 2025, the global population aged 60 or over exceeds 1.2 billion and will reach 2.1 billion by mid-century. This profound demographic transition is both a triumph of human progress and a test of social justice: it reflects advances in longevity, health, and education, yet it also exposes persistent inequities in how societies distribute resources and recognize human worth across generations.

The ageing of societies calls for a new social contract—one that values every stage of life and secures dignity, autonomy, and participation for all. Over the past two decades, the UN system has made important strides in recognizing the rights of older

persons. The establishment of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA) in 2010 marked a turning point in acknowledging gaps in international protection. Its work culminated in the 2025 Human Rights Council resolution creating an Intergovernmental Working Group mandated to elaborate a draft international convention on the rights of older persons. This historic step builds on regional instruments such as the Inter-American Convention on the Rights of Older Persons and the African Union’s 2024 Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa. Together, they signal a growing consensus: ageing is not simply a welfare issue, but a question of justice and equality. The protection of older persons’ rights must be grounded in international law, not in benevolence.

A human rights-based approach affirms that older persons are rights-holders, not recipients of charity. It reframes access to health care, social protection, and participation as enforceable entitlements derived from principles of equality and non-discrimination. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) establish these obligations clearly. Complementary perspectives—intersectionality, the life-course approach, and intergenerational equity—help reveal the deeper structures of inequality that shape ageing. Women’s unpaid care work, disability, race, and migration

UN Milestones on the Rights of Older Persons



status all intersect to produce diverse experiences of later life. Older women, for instance, remain at a double disadvantage, often being excluded from contributory pensions and enduring the cumulative effects of gendered wage gaps and informal work. Addressing these inequalities requires integrated strategies that link gender equality, social protection, and labour policy, ensuring that ageing outcomes are shaped by opportunity, not by accumulated disadvantage.

OLD AGE POVERTY

Old-age poverty remains one of the most enduring forms of structural inequality. It undermines the right to an adequate standard of living and to social security, enshrined in international law. Around 15–20 per cent of older persons in OECD countries live below national poverty lines, while in parts of Africa and Asia the figure is significantly higher. In Europe, the number of older people living in poverty has increased by over five million since 2014, reaching 16 million today. In Latin America, inflation and weak pension indexation have eroded income security, while in the United States, nearly four in five older adults have minimal savings. These statistics conceal profound gender gaps: globally, older women are nearly twice as likely as men to experience poverty due to lower lifetime earnings, shorter careers, and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care. The effects of poverty extend beyond income, influencing health, longevity, and autonomy. Studies consistently show that low-income older adults live up to nine years less than wealthier ones and experience a heavier burden of chronic disease. These inequalities are intergenerational: the absence of robust social protection forces younger family members to absorb the costs of care and health expenses, thereby perpetuating cycles of deprivation.

PENSION COVERAGE

Income security in old age depends fundamentally on effective pension systems. Pensions translate human rights obligations into concrete guarantees of dignity. While global coverage has expanded significantly—nearly 80 per cent of people above retirement age now receive some form of pension—165 million older persons remain without any coverage. The disparities between regions are stark: near-universal coverage in Europe contrasts with less than 13 per cent in low-income countries. Gender and employment status remain decisive factors: women, informal workers, and those in precarious employment are systematically excluded from contributory schemes. Fiscal arguments are often invoked to resist expansion of non-contributory social pensions, yet the evidence is compelling that such systems are affordable and yield strong social and economic returns. Experiences in Bolivia, Mauritius, Namibia, and Chile

demonstrate that universal social pensions can lift millions out of poverty while stimulating local economies. From a human rights perspective, social pensions are not subsidies, but rather public investments that reinforce social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity. Sustainable systems combine contributory and universal pillars, financed through progressive taxation and diversified sources. Anchoring the right to a pension in law transforms social protection from policy preference into an enforceable entitlement.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE AND LONG-TERM CARE SERVICES

The right to health and long-term care (LTC) is equally central to a life of dignity in old age. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirms the right to the highest attainable standard of health, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3.8) commit States to universal health coverage for all. Yet progress remains uneven. Only two-thirds of the global population is covered by social health protection; in low-income countries, the rate falls below 20 per cent. Out-of-pocket health spending continues to push millions into poverty each year. The global gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy—now more than nine years—reveals that people are living longer, but spending more time suffering from poor health or disability. Health systems remain poorly adapted to the needs of older adults, focusing on acute care rather than chronic disease management, rehabilitation, and prevention. The challenge is particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries, where ageing populations coincide with underfunded health systems and limited access to essential services.

Long-term care represents one of the most significant policy frontiers for ageing societies. Across the OECD, public spending on LTC averages just 1.7 per cent of GDP, and fewer than one in ten older adults have access to formal care services. The burden of care falls disproportionately on families—especially women—who provide more than three-quarters of all unpaid care worldwide. This unpaid labour not only sustains households but also sustains economies, yet it remains largely invisible and unsupported. Recent normative advances are helping shift this paradigm. In 2025, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights recognized care as a fundamental human right, encompassing the rights to receive care, to provide care, and to self-care. This recognition imposes obligations on States to ensure quality, accessible, and affordable care systems. Latin America's "care society" initiatives exemplify this approach: Uruguay's Integrated Care System and Colombia's National Care Policy explicitly link care provision to gender equality, employment, and social protection. These models show that rights-based care is both possible

and transformative when supported by political will and adequate resources. Public investment in care not only enhances dignity and autonomy, but also generates employment and social cohesion, making it a cornerstone of sustainable development.

HOUSING, TRANSPORT, AND DIGITAL SERVICES

Adequate housing, accessible transport, and digital inclusion are vital to independence and social participation. Yet millions of older people live in unsafe or inaccessible environments that undermine their well-being. Poor-quality housing is linked to higher risks of illness and isolation, while inadequate public transport confines many to their homes. Digital exclusion further deepens marginalization: in 2023, older adults in the United States alone lost USD 3.4 billion to online fraud, illustrating how a lack of digital literacy can compound vulnerability. Digital literacy programmes designed for older adults could contribute not only to preventing them from falling prey to online scammers, but could also help to ensure they remain active participants in the workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how physical and digital infrastructure shape resilience and autonomy. Inclusive policies can reverse these trends. Japan's nationwide home modification subsidies have extended independent living and reduced institutionalization. In Europe, intergenerational co-housing models and accessible social housing in Vienna and Finland ensure affordability and inclusion. Uruguay's Plan Ibirapitá, which distributes tablets and provides digital literacy training to low-income seniors, has improved access to services and social networks. Indeed, embedding accessibility standards and offline alternatives in law can help to ensure that digitalization enhances rather than erodes older persons' human rights.

EMPLOYMENT

Work and employment are equally part of the human rights framework. Longer lives mean longer working lives, yet older workers often face barriers ranging from discrimination to inflexible retirement policies. Between 1990 and 2050, the proportion of workers aged 55–64 will nearly double, yet many lack opportunities for reskilling. Persistent stereotypes portray older workers as less productive or resistant to change, despite evidence to the contrary. Gendered ageism compounds these barriers, particularly for women who already face labour market inequalities. Policies that promote choice and flexibility—such as partial retirement, flexible schedules, and intergenerational mentoring—can turn longevity into an economic and social advantage. Successful examples include BMW's age-friendly redesigns that improved productivity, NASA's phased retirement and mentoring programme, and India's Senior Able Citizens for Re-Employment in Dignity (SACRED)

platform. These initiatives highlight the fact that older workers' experience and knowledge are valuable assets. Ensuring equal opportunity and decent work conditions transforms the right to work from a policy aspiration into a practical reality.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND PARTICIPATION

Social participation and inclusion are the foundations of well-being and democracy. Loneliness and isolation are now recognized as public health challenges with impacts comparable to smoking or obesity. The Doha Declaration emphasizes the need to build inclusive, cohesive societies based on solidarity and participation across generations. For older adults, participation means more than activity—it is a right that affirms dignity and belonging. Yet barriers persist: from inaccessible environments to digital divides and discriminatory attitudes. Restrictive guardianship laws in some countries still limit older persons' legal capacity, preventing them from making choices about their own lives. Empowering older persons requires institutional mechanisms for participation, such as consultative councils and representation in policy processes. Local initiatives demonstrate what is possible: Germany's Lifelong Learning and Volunteering programme encourages citizens over 60 to share their skills, Albania's youth-volunteer schemes promote intergenerational solidarity, and WHO's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities now spans more than 1,500 municipalities. These initiatives show that fostering inclusion benefits all age groups, building stronger and more resilient communities.

ABUSE, NEGLECT, VIOLENCE

Violence, neglect, and abuse of older persons remain among the most widespread and least visible violations of human rights. One in six people aged 60 or above experience abuse annually, and institutional surveys show that nearly two-thirds of care staff have witnessed or perpetrated some form of mistreatment. Abuse can be physical, psychological, sexual, or financial, and it often occurs in private settings where detection is difficult. Older women, migrants, and persons with disabilities are at particular risk. Financial exploitation—often by family members or caregivers—is increasingly prevalent yet poorly regulated. International treaties prohibit inhumane or degrading treatment, but few explicitly protect older persons from abuse. The persistence of violence against older persons thus reflects a systemic failure of protection. Promising practices offer hope: Canada's RECAA initiative uses participatory theatre to empower older persons to identify and prevent abuse; the 2025 U.S. Older Americans Act strengthens oversight, ombudsman programmes, and community response systems. Such models illustrate that prevention, awareness, and accountability can

turn rhetoric into real protection. A future UN convention on the rights of older persons could close these gaps by codifying clear obligations and remedies.

HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES AND CLIMATE RISK

Humanitarian crises and climate change amplify the vulnerability of older persons, who are disproportionately affected by disasters due to mobility constraints, chronic illness, and social exclusion. They are often invisible in humanitarian assessments and overlooked in resource allocation. Past emergencies reveal the scale of neglect: older persons represented over half of the fatalities in Hurricane Katrina and Japan's 2011 tsunami. In conflict zones such as Ukraine, many are unable to flee, and thereby face extreme hardship. Integrating ageing into disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response is therefore literally a matter of life and death. Age-inclusive preparedness, accessible shelters, and continuity of health services can dramatically reduce risk. Equally important is recognizing older persons as active agents of resilience—their experience, caregiving roles, and community leadership are vital to recovery and adaptation. As climate risks intensify, age-sensitive planning must become a core element of global and national strategies.

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In all these areas, the challenges of ageing reveal deeper questions about how societies value life and share responsibility across generations. Ageing is not simply a demographic trend or fiscal concern; it is a measure of justice and cohesion. The persistent invisibility of older persons in law and policy reflects the erosion of solidarity that the social development agenda seeks to rebuild. The emerging global movement towards the drafting of a new UN legally binding instrument on the promotion and protection of

older persons, (LBI) offers a unique opportunity to redefine the social contract. Such an LBI would provide a comprehensive framework covering equality, autonomy, participation, care, and protection from violence—turning fragmented commitments into enforceable rights and guiding States in building inclusive societies for all ages.

The way forward demands coordinated and sustained action. Governments should adopt a life-course approach to social protection, ensuring that every person has access to income security, education, and health care from childhood to old age. Health and long-term care systems must be universal, rights-based, and adequately funded, integrating medical and social services while recognizing the rights of caregivers. As suggested earlier, housing, transport, and digital infrastructure should be designed for accessibility and inclusion, closing gaps that exclude older persons from community life. Labour markets must combat age discrimination and support lifelong learning, while participation mechanisms must ensure that older persons have a clear voice in all decisions that affect them. Finally, States must criminalize elder abuse, strengthen monitoring systems, and ensure that humanitarian and climate responses explicitly address the needs and contributions of older persons.

A renewed social contract for ageing is not only possible, but necessary. Longevity is one of humanity's greatest achievements; it should not become a source of inequality or exclusion. This summit provides us with a crucial opportunity to align social, economic, and human rights agendas around the principle that dignity and equality have no age limit. Building societies that respect, empower, and include older persons will strengthen the foundations of democracy and sustainable development for all generations. If approached with vision and solidarity, population ageing can become a catalyst for a fairer, more caring, and more resilient world for everyone. ■

*A more in-depth version of this paper will be available online at: www.ohchr.org/publications as of January 2026

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