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Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: Second World Assembly on Ageing

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 77/190 on the follow-up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing. Issued at the midway point towards 2030, the report provides an update on progress made since 2015 towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular its aspects of relevance to older persons and population ageing. The report highlights key issues and challenges in the full and effective inclusion of older persons in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also features selected work carried out by the Inter-Agency Group on Ageing. Key recommendations for consideration by Member States are set out in the concluding section.

* A/78/150.
I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 77/190 on the follow-up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing. It follows the previous report of the Secretary-General (A/77/134), which included an analysis of the impact of digital technologies on older persons and highlighted the policy implications for older persons of issues addressed in the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Roadmap for digital cooperation: implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation” (A/74/821).

2. The General Assembly, in its resolution 77/190, called upon Member States and the international community to cooperate, support and participate in the global efforts towards an age-inclusive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to mobilize all necessary resources and support in that regard, according to national plans and strategies, including through an integrated and multifaceted approach to improving the well-being of older persons. It also encouraged Member States to seize the opportunity to take into account issues of relevance to older persons in their efforts to promote the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Section II of the present report serves to address progress at the midway point of the 2030 Agenda, in particular aspects of the 2030 Agenda relevant to older persons and population ageing, on the basis of voluntary national reviews submitted to the high-level political forum on sustainable development in the period 2016–2022. In the section, the main issues are identified and country-level examples are provided to show the five Sustainable Development Goals under which older persons receive the most attention in Member State reporting. The five Goals reviewed were: Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere); Goal 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages); Goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls); Goal 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all); and Goal 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries).

4. In section III key issues are highlighted and challenges to the full and effective inclusion of older persons in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda are identified. The section provides an analysis of cross-cutting issues that have an impact on progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda from the perspective of older persons and population ageing. Section IV features selected work conducted by the Inter-Agency Group on Ageing, and key recommendations for consideration by Member States are set out in section V.

II. Progress towards achieving the Goals at the midway point: older persons and population ageing in the voluntary national reviews (2016–2022)

5. The voluntary national reviews submitted by Member States to the high-level political forum in the period 2016–2022 showed varying levels of awareness of and response to population ageing. The top five Goals identified by Member States in their reviews concerning older persons and population ageing were Goals 1, 3, 5, 8 and 10. References to older persons and population ageing across the other 12 interrelated Goals were lacking, which reflects current realities on the ground.
A. Goal 1: end poverty in all its forms everywhere

6. To the greatest extent, Member States addressed the situation of older persons and initiatives to respond to their diverse needs and preferences under Goal 1. Older persons, as a group that experiences heightened risk of poverty, were identified in most of the reviews, including those from Andorra (2022), Argentina (2022), Ghana (2022), Kyrgyzstan (2020), Oman (2019) and Sri Lanka (2022). In the reviews from countries such as Kenya (2020), Liberia (2020) and the Republic of Moldova (2020) it is recognized that where additional grounds of discrimination intersect with old age, the risk of poverty increases, such as is the case for older women, older persons living in rural areas and households headed by older persons, and for older migrants and older refugees.

7. Social protection, including old age contributory and non-contributory pensions, was recognized in virtually all the reviews, as the front-line response to the income insecurity experienced by many older persons. According to data available from the International Labour Organization (ILO), 77.5 per cent of people above retirement age globally receive some form of old-age pension. Pensions are the most widespread form of social protection worldwide for older women and men, yet challenges in coverage and adequacy persist, and major inequalities exist in the access to pensions across regions, between women and men, and between rural and urban areas.

8. Member States tackle income insecurity and poverty among older persons on several fronts. In most of the reviews, Member States underscored and stressed the capacity of social protection tools to protect older persons from poverty or reduce poverty in old age. For instance, it was noted in the review by New Zealand (2019) that compared to other age groups, older nationals were less likely to experience material hardship or have low income after housing costs, as a result of the provision of a public universal retirement pension, also known as the New Zealand superannuation fund. In addition, the Government of New Zealand set up the KiwiSaver, which is a voluntary, work-based retirement saving scheme to assist participants in saving for retirement.

9. Progress towards achieving Goal 1 through the provision of social benefits has been mixed. For example, in the review by South Africa (2019) the critical role of social grants was underscored as a major intervention by the Government in mitigating poverty. Approximately 71.9 per cent of all older persons in the country received social grants in 2015. Furthermore, it was indicated that, in the absence of the social assistance system in South Africa, poverty rates would have been 8 percentage points higher than the level estimated at the time of reporting for the total population, demonstrating that the system performs well in addressing poverty. On the other hand, according to the review by Latvia (2022), the inadequacy and low impact of social transfers on poverty reduction among all groups in society was revealed, in particular older persons.

10. In several reviews, including those by Cabo Verde (2021), Lesotho (2022) and Mali (2022) it was noted that, as a group, older persons were often the main beneficiaries of national social protection systems because of the significance of old-age pensions as a share of national budgets dedicated to social protection. For

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1 The year in which each voluntary national review was submitted is given in parentheses. The reviews referenced can be found on the website of the high-level political forum, at https://hlpf.un.org/inputs.

instance, in the review by Seychelles (2020), it was noted that 79 per cent of the country’s total social protection spending in 2015 was allocated to older persons.

11. Since 2016, reviews conducted by Member States of progress at the national level have facilitated the sharing of experiences and lessons learned from various reforms and initiatives intended to strengthen social protection systems and safety nets. ILO reported in 2021 that significant progress had been achieved in extending the coverage of pension systems in less developed countries. For example, many countries had pursued efforts to strengthen and extend contributory pension systems, including Bulgaria (2020), Cameroon (2019), Côte d’Ivoire (2022), Djibouti (2022), Indonesia (2021) and Lesotho (2022).

12. In Lesotho (2022), while many social protection programmes had stagnated in the past years, the old-age pension system had expanded. In Indonesia (2021), where poverty rates among the population aged 60 years or over were higher than for the population aged 59 years or below, expanding social assistance and social insurance coverage had been key in the country’s strategy to eradicate poverty. According to the review by Cambodia (2019) the establishment of the national social security fund for civil servants and the national social security fund, among others, were cited as key policies to accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal 1.

13. Another initiative to strengthen social protection for older persons that was highlighted in several reviews was the introduction and/or strengthening of non-contributory pensions. For instance, according to the review by Jamaica (2022) a social pension programme was introduced in 2021, targeting persons 75 years or over without income support and providing cash transfers. To expand the reach of the programme, the Parliament passed the National Identification and Registration Act, was passed in Parliament with the aim of better identifying the most vulnerable persons in need of social protection.

14. Several countries addressed the inadequacy of pensions by increasing the benefits of old-age pensions, as reported by Azerbaijan (2021), Bulgaria (2020) and Namibia (2021). Some countries have developed benefits targeted at older persons who are more at risk of poverty. For instance, according to the review by Estonia (2020), a lump sum benefit was introduced in 2017 to reduce poverty among pensioners living alone, particularly older women, whose risk of poverty was significantly higher compared to other groups in the country.

15. Member States reported on the provision of non-monetary contributions and recognized their role in tackling poverty among older persons. For example, in the reviews by Afghanistan (2021), Côte d’Ivoire (2022) and Nicaragua (2021) the provision of support to older persons in the form of increased access to essential services, such as electricity and gas, was cited, while the provision of food items was cited in the reviews Angola (2021) and Jamaica (2022). Non-monetary contributions reported in other reviews included the provision of varying degrees of support in access to health care, education and public transportation.

16. Measures to address poverty by increasing employment among older persons were identified by some countries in their reporting on Goal 1. Such measures were often linked to changes in statutory retirement ages. For instance, it was noted that an amendment had been passed in 2018 by Estonia (2020) to renew the old-age pension paid under the State Pension Insurance Act, linking the retirement age to the average life expectancy from 2027 onwards. Many countries raised concerns regarding the

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3 Ibid.

adverse effect of increasing levels of informal employment on current and future access to pensions, including Angola (2021), Colombia (2021) and Rwanda (2019).

17. In the review by Sri Lanka (2022), the link between inadequate coverage of pension schemes for older workers in the informal economy and the national-level findings of the multidimensional poverty index was stressed, suggesting that people aged 65 years or over were the poorest age group in Sri Lanka with the highest headcount ratio of poverty in the country. While it was shown that retired public servants received a pension, the majority of workers in the informal economy, which was estimated to account for 57 per cent of total employment in the country, were not eligible for current pension schemes. Similarly, in the review by Burundi (2020), several challenges were identified at the national level with regard to addressing the impact of informality on future pensions, including the inadequacy of existing pensions; weak institutions; low income among civil servants; insufficient information on pension rights and benefits; and the lack of awareness among the population about the importance of contributing to pensions.

B. **Goal 3: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages**

18. As people live longer, health systems must be prepared to respond to population ageing to ensure that additional years are lived in good health and well-being. Yet, according to available data, between 2000 and 2019 the gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy at the age of 60 increased for both men and women. Although coverage of essential health services has improved globally over the last two decades, all countries still face considerable challenges in ensuring universal health coverage. There has been an increase in the proportion of people facing financial hardship due to out-of-pocket health spending, with poorest households, particularly those with older and dependent adults, experiencing the highest financial burden. It is imperative to devote more efforts towards ensuring that older persons have access to person-centred integrated care and long-term care without incurring catastrophic financial hardship.

19. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed the inability of countries to adequately respond to the needs of older persons and to address the consequences of age-based discrimination in their well-being. Globally, 82 per cent of the estimated deaths due to the pandemic occurred in people aged 60 years or over. The pandemic highlighted the gravity of existing gaps in national policies and health and social systems and their detrimental consequences on the lives of older persons and stressed the need to better adapt such systems to the demographic realities of population ageing.

20. The reviews included discussions of the multiple challenges faced by older persons in accessing adequate health care. Higher poverty rates among older persons were seen to be associated with the unmet need for health services. In 2020, a survey on the social demographic impact of COVID-19 carried out in Indonesia (2021) showed that about half of respondents of all ages saw their income decrease during the pandemic while facing an increase in health-care spending, a reality that was experienced by older persons to a greater extent than other groups. Over half of older persons surveyed reported reducing out-of-pocket spending on health services to compensate for reduced income. In the review by India (2020), the fact that health

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7 Ibid.
and nutrition surveys in the country focused solely on the population below 60 years of age was seen as a challenge in understanding and addressing the needs of older persons. Likewise, insufficient dedicated public funding for the care of older persons was identified in the review by Sri Lanka (2022), as a factor in deepening inequalities in access to health care.

21. In assessing progress on ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages, some countries reported that changes in population age structures had a substantial effect on disease structures. In the reviews of many countries, including Algeria (2019), Czechia (2021), Guatemala (2019), Nigeria (2020), the Russian Federation (2020), Slovenia (2020), Tunisia (2021) and the United Arab Emirates (2022), the increased incidence of chronic diseases as a result of population ageing was addressed.

22. In the reviews by Japan (2021) and Spain (2021), the gap between the average life expectancy and the healthy life expectancy were discussed in the context of Goal 3. In Spain, where life expectancy increased by more than four years between 2000 and 2019, reaching 83.5 years on average, it was noted that many of those additional years were lived with health problems and/or disabilities. About 60 per cent of the population aged 65 years or over had at least one chronic disease, with women experiencing worse health conditions than men in old age. In reviews by countries such as Finland (2020) and Nepal (2020) the need to increase the focus on preventative care to achieve long and healthy lives was underscored.

23. According to the review by Japan (2021), in addition to an increase in the incidence of chronic diseases, population ageing also increased the need to maintain and improve the quality of life of persons living with illness. Furthermore, the importance of re-examining health-care delivery systems was highlighted to ensure that they were person-focused and services were provided seamlessly and efficiently, as well as to integrate health-care services with a broad range of social services such as suitable housing, support for independence in daily living, and disease prevention, among others. In the review by Finland (2020), the rising number of older persons in the country was highlighted, as were insufficient measures targeted to the health and well-being of older persons. In several reviews, including those by Cuba (2021), Japan (2021) and Sweden (2021), the rising costs and pressures on health-care systems as their populations age were outlined.

24. Population ageing was linked in many of the reviews with the increased need for mental health services. The rise in the number of people with mental health conditions and with dementia was referenced in several reviews, including those by Greece (2022), India (2020), Japan (2021), Lesotho (2019) and Slovenia (2020), as was the need to strengthen health-care services in those areas. For example, in the reviews by El Salvador (2022) and Slovenia (2020) explicit mention was made of the higher prevalence of suicide among older persons. While the suicide mortality rate in Slovenia had declined for younger men and women in the previous decade, the rate remained unchanged for people aged 65 years or over, with a rate in 2018 at almost 15 deaths per 100,000 for the total population, compared with about 30 deaths per 100,000 for people aged 65 years or over. In the reviews by Lesotho (2019), the Russian Federation (2020) and Sweden (2021) the adverse impact of loneliness and isolation on the health of older persons is stressed. As a policy response, Sweden (2021) introduced a grant in 2019 to prevent loneliness and depression among older persons. The launch of the “silver volunteering” programme, designed to encourage social engagement and prevent loneliness and depression among older persons, was highlighted in the review by the Russian Federation (2020).

25. Pressure on health-care systems as a result of increased demand for long-term care and support services was addressed in several reviews. Some of the challenges
identified related to inadequate institutional care, lack of capacity, insufficient financial resources, the impact of rural to urban migration on availability of long-term care and support service providers, as well as the changing situation of families and domestic roles, among others. In that context, the importance of the following were highlighted in the review by Spain (2021): investing more resources in long-term care, promoting deinstitutionalization strategies at the national level and increasing green spaces in residential areas of the country.

26. Initiatives to increase access by older persons to health-care services and to promote healthy ageing are varied. Since poverty was identified as one of the main challenges to older persons being able to access health care, various policy measures were cited in the reviews by Dominica (2022), Estonia (2020), Iceland (2019) and Jamaica (2022) to make primary care, dental care and/or access to medicines more affordable for older persons, mainly through subsidies or by providing such services free of charge for them.

27. Changes in the demographic and disease profile of countries with ageing populations also require the promotion of healthy ageing throughout the life course in general, and for the older population specifically. For example, reference was made in reviews by Andorra (2022) and Germany (2021) to supporting the United Nations Decade for Healthy Ageing (2021–2030). In Ecuador (2020), the intervention known as My Best Years was aimed at promoting active and healthy ageing by providing a package of services, which relied on primary and specialist physicians, for the care and monitoring of the health of older persons. In Andorra (2022) a service on ageing in good health was launched which, among other actions, was aimed at assessing the intrinsic capacities of older persons and establishing interventions with dietary and physical components. Furthermore, the purpose of the Aptitude project in Andorra was to promote health and autonomy among older persons by supporting interventions related to exercise, dietary habits, training, research and innovation in the field of geriatrics.

28. In countries experiencing rapid population ageing, the development of policy instruments and the expansion of capacities and resources in areas such as care and support services for older persons is a priority. In the review by Greece (2022), a pilot programme on psychogeriatric support was launched to promote health and mental health among older persons, with an emphasis on depression. In the review by India (2020), multiple measures were identified as being needed to adequately address the situation of older persons in the country, including by expanding the definition of geriatric care, maintenance and welfare; removing ceilings on maximum maintenance amounts to be awarded to older parents; ensuring that the registration of care homes and service agencies was mandatory; and setting minimum standards for care homes.

C. Goal 5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

29. Women often face higher risks and greater burdens as a result of inequalities experienced during the life course, as well as the intersection of age and gender as grounds of discrimination. In the reviews by Czechia (2021), Indonesia (2021), Malaysia (2021), Saint Lucia (2019) and Timor-Leste (2019), among others, older women were identified as a group that was particularly at risk of poverty. Such risk was shown to be exacerbated by widowhood, as noted in the reviews by Malaysia (2021) and Timor-Leste (2019). In the review by Spain (2021), women were seen to experience worse health conditions than men in old age, as a consequence of lifelong gender inequalities.
30. Lower labour force participation rates among women jeopardize income security at all ages and hamper the ability of women to accumulate assets and save for old age. According to ILO, the global labour force participation rate for women of working age is under 47 per cent, while for men it is 72 per cent, representing a difference of 25 percentage points.\(^9\) Persistent traditional gender roles, lack of work-life balance in employment, lack of transport and lack of affordable care for children and other family dependants are identified as the main barriers for the participation of working-age women in the formal labour market. In the review by Malaysia (2021), it was reported that a majority of women in the country were vulnerable to old age poverty and that the situation was linked to the labour force participation of working-age women in the country which, at 56 per cent, was the lowest in the region.

31. In addition to the gender gap in employment there is a gender pay gap, with estimates showing that women are paid about 20 per cent less than men on average at the global level.\(^10\) Data from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2019) showed that the gender pay gap in the country increased with age. The largest gender pay gap existed for those 50 to 59 years of age (25.9 per cent), compared with those 18 to 21 years of age, at 1.4 per cent. Factors that accounted for the larger pay gap for older women in the country included time taken out of the workforce to care for children, the better qualification of younger women compared with their male peers than was the case among older workers, and lower earnings progression over the career course of women with respect to men.

32. Globally, women are more likely to be employed in the informal economy and be engaged in work that potentially puts them at a higher risk of vulnerability and precariousness, including care work. In many reviews, the unequal distribution of care responsibilities within the family was identified as affecting the capacity of women of all ages to engage in full-time formal employment.

33. As identified by many countries in their reviews, the underlying drivers of gender inequality perpetuated gender gaps in access to social protection, which compounded the risk of poverty among older women. In most countries, women were shown to be less likely than men to contribute to pension schemes and therefore less likely to receive a pension in old age. Globally, 26 per cent of working-age women are covered under a pension scheme, compared with 39 per cent of men. The gap is more marked in lower-middle-income countries where only 8 per cent of women are covered by pension schemes, with respect to 21 per cent of men.\(^11\)

34. Initiatives to address the gender gap in access to social protection were reported by several countries. According to the review by Argentina (2022), the country modified its pension law to formally account for unpaid care work performed by women throughout their lifetime, by computing years of service for each child born and by counting maternity leave and leave of absence periods as service time, thus facilitating access to retirement for women aged 60 or over who did not have the mandatory 30 years of necessary contributions. In the review by Belarus (2022), legislation took into account periods of care for young children and persons with disabilities in the length of employment to calculate pension amounts.

35. Similar measures were reported by Spain (2021), where a pension supplement would be granted to parents who met the requirements proving that maternity and/or paternity and childcare had damaged their contribution career. In situations in which neither parent claimed such a supplement, the Government would apply the

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supplement to the contributory pensions for the mother’s retirement. In Austria (2020), the project Transparent Pension Future (TRAPEZ) was launched to develop approaches to reducing the gender gap in pensions. Similarly, in Tunisia (2019), efforts were aimed at increasing pensions for women living in rural areas through the country’s social security system.

36. Elder abuse, a human rights violation, was discussed in several reviews in the context of Goal 5, including for example, Israel (2019), Nicaragua (2021), Palau (2019) and Republic of Moldova (2020). According to a study in the Republic of Moldova (2020), about 30 per cent of older persons in the country had been victims of violence or abuse, of whom two thirds were women. Programmes to prevent and address domestic violence in Israel (2019) included domestic violence units for the prevention of elder abuse.

D. Goal 8: promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

37. It was revealed in many of the reviews that higher unemployment rates, the prevalence of informality and widespread ageism were the main barriers faced by older persons in accessing decent work. In San Marino (2021), where the total unemployment rate had decreased since 2015, there had been an increase in the number of unemployed persons aged 49 years or over. In the review by Denmark (2021), the difficulties faced by unemployed workers aged 50 to 65 years to find employment were addressed. In Indonesia (2021), about a third of older persons in the low-income bracket reported engaging in inadequate work out of necessity. In the Republic of Moldova (2020), age discrimination in its labour market was indicated as being quite common, affecting both youth and people aged 50 years or over. According to older workers in the country, the main forms of discrimination concerning their right to work were due to barriers in accessing decent work in the form of limited access to training, incentives to retire early and difficulty in finding work, among others.

38. The impact of population ageing on labour markets was addressed by many countries. The reduction in the size of the working-age population and the pressure on public finances due to the rising number of people above retirement ages were highlighted in the reviews by Japan (2021), Malaysia (2021), Norway (2021), Slovenia (2020), Switzerland (2022) and Timor-Leste (2019), among others. In that context, several reviews included discussions on the need to reform existing pension systems, as well as increase the labour force participation among certain age groups, including older persons. In Cuba (2021), where the highest percentage of workers were indicated as being between the ages of 40 and 59, policies had been implemented to promote post-retirement employment among older persons who were beyond the retirement age and who felt fit to work. In the review by Chile (2019), importance was placed on the need to create more inclusive labour markets in which everyone, in particular people who experienced vulnerabilities, could participate in quality work, as well as to eliminate existing discrimination in employment against some societal groups, including older workers.

39. In many of the reviews, three broad types of measures were identified for addressing the diverse situation of older persons in the context of Goal 8: (a) improving social protection systems; (b) promoting decent work among older persons; and (c) in some cases, raising official or statutory retirement ages. For instance, according to the review by Switzerland (2022), social security system reforms were intended to bridge benefits for older persons who had become unemployed shortly before reaching the statutory retirement age.
40. Many countries shared initiatives that sought to improve income among older persons through employment. For example, a programme in the United Arab Emirates (2022) was created to assist older persons who owned businesses in revamping their product line and image, thus promoting self-dependency. Strategies adopted by Cuba (2021) included the promotion of more flexible working arrangements, professional development programmes and economic incentive schemes. Promotion of lifelong learning and training among older persons was highlighted by Bulgaria (2020) and Thailand (2021), among others. Between 2016 and 2020, seven schemes were implemented in Cyprus (2021) that were geared towards supporting employers to hire unemployed persons within groups at higher risks, including persons aged 50 years or over. In both the Republic of Moldova (2020) and Papua New Guinea (2020) the need to better support older workers and create age-friendly work environments was highlighted.

41. To improve fiscal sustainability, several countries indicated increases in official or statutory retirement ages. In Mauritius (2019), the retirement age had been increased from 60 to 65 years to address the ageing of the population. According to the Russian Federation (2020) a phased increase of the retirement age would be implemented to expand the size of the working-age population.

E. Goal 10: reduce inequality within and among countries

42. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, available data revealed that the income of the bottom 40 per cent of the world population grew at a rate higher than the national averages in many countries. However, the impact of the pandemic threatens this positive trend and consequently worsens global inequality at the global level.12 The economic inequalities experienced by many older persons were addressed in the reviews. Furthermore, in most of the reviews older persons were recognized as a population group at risk of being left behind in sustainable development.

43. In many countries older persons were identified as one of the social groups most at risk of experiencing vulnerability to social exclusion and discrimination. Links were also made between the increased risk of exclusion and higher poverty rates, and the lack of access to adequate social protection among older persons, by countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (2019), Indonesia (2021), New Zealand (2019) and Senegal (2022). In the review by Latvia (2022), increased income inequality in the country was reported among people of retirement age. In the review by Afghanistan (2019), it was noted that data disaggregation by gender, age, income, location, ethnicity, disability, refugee status or status as an internally displaced person, or and any other specific socioeconomic characteristics, was indicated as being essential to developing and implementing effective policies concerning inequality and discrimination.

44. Strengthening policy and legal frameworks that specifically target older persons at the national and regional levels was raised in the reviews by several countries, such as Armenia (2020), El Salvador (2022), Lesotho (2019) and the Philippines (2019) as a means to promote the inclusion of older persons in their communities. According to the review by the Republic of Moldova (2020), in addition to crafting effective policy responses and action plans targeting older persons, the country was making gradual efforts to integrate population ageing as a core consideration in the national development strategy and in employment-related policies.

45. Several countries highlighted the pervasive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inequality levels, together with the different national policy responses. It was indicated in the review by Jamaica (2022) that the COVID Allocation of Resources

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12 See A/78/80-E/2023/64.
for Employees programme had been created as a temporary cash transfer programme to cushion the economic impact of the pandemic on individuals and businesses and was directed towards those more at risk of poverty, including older persons.

III. Delivering on Sustainable Development Goals commitments in ageing societies

46. Population ageing is a universal phenomenon. Virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older persons in the population. Absolute numbers of older persons are forecast to more than double by 2050; the overall proportion of persons aged 65 years or over will rise from 10 per cent in 2021 to 17 per cent by 2050; and longevity has been steadily increasing for decades in almost every country. Globally, babies born in 2022, on average, have a life expectancy of 72.3 years. That is 25 years longer than those born in 1950.13 As population ageing is growing in intensity around the world, so too must policy action. The implementation of the Goals cannot be turbocharged, across different makeups in national demographics and in different contexts, without addressing the effects of these changes in both mainstreamed and targeted ways.

47. The relevance of population ageing for Government policies is well documented in the responses provided to the twelfth United Nations Inquiry among Governments on Population and Development14 conducted during the period 2018–2019, in which two thirds of the Governments with available data considered population ageing to be a matter of major policy concern for the coming decades.15 However, in practice and in global policy conversations on actions for achieving the Goals, older persons and population ageing are often overlooked. Interventions to achieve the Goals have so far fallen short of responding to this key demographic shift in societies. As a result, the pledge contained in the 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind” is imperilled.

48. According to the report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Goals,16 adopting a life course approach to essential services is fundamental to a strong social contract, yet existing systems continue to take a fragmented approach, with limited focus on an intergenerational approach across socioeconomic systems that could be used to help older persons recover from past deprivations.

49. It is appropriate for all contexts of the Goals to respond to the vast inequalities and diverse needs, preferences and capabilities of older persons. Policy analysis using a social definition of older age allows for these differences. There is, however, no intergovernmentally agreed definition of an older person. Demographic analysis may use chronological ages, but this metric is of limited use in country-specific contexts in which Member States are seeking targeted national or local policies. The determination of policies to support the inclusion of older persons requires a social definition of who is “older”. A social definition is one in which older age, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. This combination of definition and analysis supports responsive policies to context-specific barriers.

50. Analysis of 291 national voluntary reviews showed that older persons and population ageing were neglected or, where included, were often only a mention among groups left behind. Reviews submitted to the high-level political forum in the

16 A/78/80-E/2023/64.
period 2016–2022, most often included older persons in reviews of poverty reduction under Goal 1 (see figure I), focusing on social protection measures. Even in such cases, in which older persons were explicitly included in an indicator, and social protection was a salient feature of policymaking for population ageing, less than half of the reviews mentioned older persons beyond their inclusion in a list of groups.

Figure 1
Voluntary national reviews, 2016–2022, that refer to older persons and population ageing, by Sustainable Development Goal
(Percentage)

Source: Analysis based on voluntary national reviews submitted to the high-level political forum. Available at https://hlpf.un.org/inputs.

51. Population ageing should not be viewed as intrinsically negative. It is a triumph of development. The international community is responsible for being vigilant against the implicit biases of ageism that would exclude or vilify older persons. Insidious substantive references in voluntary national reviews problematize population ageing rather than the lack of change in systems affected by such changes. Older persons are often referred to as a burden in national budgets and as an impediment to the achievement of the Goals.

52. Such references also obscure the position of older persons as beneficiaries of sustainable development. Some discussions of Goal 5, for example, reference older persons only as objects of care provided by younger women and thus as a hindrance to the wider incorporation of women into formal labour markets. This perspective ignores two important characteristics of these care arrangements: the contributions of older persons, especially older women, to the care provided; and the lack of participation by older persons in decisions concerning the support they receive. Older persons may not wish to participate in such arrangements any more than their families.

53. Policymaking must also include the participation of older persons. There would likely be greater inclusion of older persons in the reviews if the participation of older persons were supported in every phase of the processes related to the Goals, from planning and developing policies to budgeting and implementation. A well-recognized barrier to participation is poverty. 18 Where older persons are not

17 See E/CN.3/2017/2, annex III, indicator 1.3.1: “Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable”.
participating in the processes aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development, they are at risk of falling even further behind. Action must be taken now to ensure that current and future generations of older persons are full participants in the development process and are not denied the opportunity to share in its benefits.

54. The inclusion and participation of older persons, hearing their voices, in their own words, would also better ensure that Governments were following the highest standards in implementation. This might include, for example, recognizing and supporting the rights of older persons with disabilities to live independently in the community on an equal basis with others. Member States included positive efforts towards deinstitutionalization in line with the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, guidelines on deinstitutionalization, including in emergencies, a reflection of the highest standard. On the opposing view, others described potential efforts seeking to increase institutionalization. Such programmes run counter to best practices and agreed norms and could be improved by considering the voices and choices of older persons themselves.

55. Another necessary component of improving response to population ageing in the Goals is significantly increasing the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. This is of particular importance in less developed countries. Some Member States have called for quality and up-to-date statistical information to support policy planning and decision-making around ageing, and to monitor outcomes. Such calls should be heeded across the world.

56. Much of the data related to the Goal indicators is currently not disaggregated into older age, limiting inclusion in evidence-based policymaking opportunities and voluntary national reviews. Without it, nuanced and targeted actions cannot respond to intersectionalities, such as the experiences of urban older women in the contexts of Goal 11, on sustainable cities, or Goal 5, on violence against older women. Even for the most widely recognized Goal, ending poverty, the Goal under which older persons received the most attention in the reviews, there is a critical gendered component that is overlooked without disaggregation. In 99 developed countries with data, higher levels of relative poverty among older persons compared to people of working age are due to greater poverty among older women. This shows the importance of disaggregating data and using that data to develop potentially targeted interventions.

57. While there is no explicit mention of older persons in all the Goals, population ageing should be mainstreamed throughout efforts to achieve all of them. For example, in Goal 3, older persons are not referenced beyond referencing “all ages”. However, an indicator for target 3.4 contains references to chronic diseases closely associated with older age. This should result in the broad inclusion of older persons in the reviews on the Goal, yet only 41 per cent of the reviews responding to Goal 3 included any mention of older persons (figure I).

58. Older persons should also be mainstreamed throughout the Goals because of the interconnected nature of the Goals. Goal 2 (zero hunger) includes older persons in its target 2.2 (ending malnutrition), and this relates directly to poverty and climate action, for example.

59. There is a significant opportunity to mainstream older persons across work on digital literacy and foundational inclusive and accessible digital infrastructures to ensure meaningful connectivity for all. In the reviews by some Member States, the

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19 See CRPD/C/5.
lack of digital skills among older populations was noted, and digital literacy programmes aimed at older persons were described. Without such interventions, there is a risk of older persons being left further behind in an increasingly digital world. The risks of digital exclusion have significant human rights and development implications. Such risks were not discussed in the reviews, even in those by Member States reporting on the digitization of such vital services as pension benefits.

60. Despite the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on older persons, little attention was paid to older persons in the reviews. In fact, mentions of older persons in the reviews declined in 2021 and 2022 (see figure II).

Figure II
Voluntary national reviews that include mention of older persons, 2016–2022
(Percentage)

61. One potential reason for this lack of attention is the unavailability of data. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed wide gaps in data collection that were similar across country income groups. The proportion of countries surveyed with difficulty collecting data on older persons ranged from 25 to 29 per cent across income groups.  

As stated in the policy brief of the Secretary-General to Member States at the outset of the pandemic, “We need to broaden our partnership with civil society and others and consult older persons to harness their knowledge and ensure their full inclusion in shaping the policies that affect their lives”.  

62. As older populations are projected to increase, likewise the urgency of tackling some of the main barriers to the participation of older persons in development increases, including ageism, restrictive social and cultural norms, and gaps in digital literacy, among others. These are not just barriers to older persons benefiting from sustainable development efforts; these barriers devalue and limit the contribution of older persons to sustainable development. This implicates their human rights and the moral imperatives of everyone, in addition to the socioeconomic necessity of inclusion for these universal goals.


IV. United Nations system: updates and initiatives to advance ageing issues

63. In 2022, a decision was made to formalize the Inter-Agency Group on Ageing. In the light of renewed momentum and opportunities, the work of the Group will be geared towards developing a strategy on older persons and population ageing to support age-responsive approaches, fully integrating the human rights and dignity of older persons into the work of the United Nations system.

64. The Database on Households and Living Arrangements of Older Persons and the Database on Older Persons in Collective Living Quarters were updated by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2022, both of which provide valuable information for researchers, policymakers, and advocates working towards achieving the Goals, in particular Goals 1, 3 and 5. As population ageing becomes more prevalent, the living arrangements and family support for older persons have become increasingly important policy concerns in many countries.

65. A high-level panel discussion on the outcomes of the fourth review and appraisal cycle of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, was held by the Commission for Social Development at its sixty-first session, engaging stakeholders from all the regions. The Commission recommended to the Economic and Social Council the adoption of a draft resolution entitled “Fourth review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002”, which was later adopted as Council resolution 2023/15.

66. Several regional commissions provided support to Member States, in particular around synergies between the Madrid Plan of Action, and the 2030 Agenda. For example, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean held a side event during the sixth meeting of the Forum of Latin American and Caribbean Countries on Sustainable Development in 2022 to reflect, analyse and identify priorities with special reference to the commitments made in the Santiago Declaration to move towards full access of older persons to the protection and guarantee of their rights and review synergies with the fulfilment of the Goals. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific mapped the objectives of the Madrid Plan of Action against the Goals, the targets and indicators to provide a monitoring framework for Member States to regularly assess the situation of older persons in the region within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

67. Since its inception, special track of the World Summit on the Information Society on information and communication technologies and older persons has provided an example of successful collaboration at the international level between United Nations entities, the private sector and civil society. Over 500 people attended the special track, participating in a series of workshops on topics including healthy ageing, innovation and preventive care, age-friendly environments and smart homes, medical innovation and integrated care, and investment in age technology.

68. The World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with members of the Inter-Agency Group on Ageing and stakeholders, continued to implement activities across the action areas and enablers of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030).

26 WHO, document A76/37.
WHO organized high-level global and regional advocacy events and developed a range of knowledge products to help stakeholders raise awareness and promote action to combat ageism. WHO expanded and strengthened the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities, enabling nearly 1,500 cities and communities in over 50 countries to become better places in which to grow older. Together with the International Federation on Ageing, WHO led an online mentoring programme on age-friendly environments, training over 330 participants from over 55 countries across all regions.

V. Recommendations

69. The absence of older persons in the presentation of voluntary national reviews at the United Nations mirrors their underrepresentation in the broader development discourse. This situation must change if the world wishes to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals while ensuring that no one is left behind. Population ageing and the myriad responses that it demands should be a core focus at the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in 2023, the Summit of the Future in 2024 and the proposed social summit in 2025. Member States should acknowledge that population ageing is a consequence of successful development and reflect on what it means in their own contexts for persons of all ages both today and in the future.

70. Member States are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

   (a) Mainstream ageing by considering and integrating both the human rights of older persons and the linkages between population ageing and sustainable development into policies and programmes across all levels of government, including as part of national plans and strategic efforts to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda;

   (b) Support and invigorate the work of national focal points on ageing and strengthen their capacities to follow up on plans of action on ageing and to undertake age-sensitive and gender-sensitive analyses and impact assessments of policies aimed at achieving the Goals;

   (c) Ensure that older persons, in their diversity, are included in decision-making at all levels, including for the national, regional and global implementation of the 2030 Agenda;

   (d) Strengthen the involvement of older persons in international forums, inter alia, by including them in national delegations for the General Assembly, the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in 2023, the Summit of the Future in 2024 and the proposed World Social Summit in 2025;

   (e) Support the capacity of national statistical offices to address existing deficits in data on ageing, including age caps, gaps in coverage, limited information on intrahousehold dynamics, and the lack of consistent disaggregation by age in higher age groups, so as to contribute effectively to follow-up, reporting and accountability processes for the Goals related to older persons and population ageing;

   (f) Recognize the importance of multilateral cooperation in statistical matters, including efforts to harmonize standards and definitions related to age, bearing in mind that the social definition of “older ages” or “older persons” may vary across populations and over time.