

October 9, 2008

DPI/NGO BRIEFING ON THE
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS (IDOP)
Thursday, October 2, 2008, 10:00 AM to 4:30 PM

1. This briefing was held in recognition of the International Day of Older Persons, which is observed each year on October 1 since the General Assembly passed resolution 45/106 on December 14, 1990. This day was an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of older persons within their respective societies and to evaluate their current situation in the light of General Assembly resolution 46/91, which encourages Governments to incorporate the principles of independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity into their national programs.

As 2008 marks the 60th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the NGO Relations Cluster of the Department of Public Information, in consultation with the NGO Committee on Aging in New York, decided to focus the 18th observance of the International Day of Older Persons on a process that will lead to the development and acceptance of a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

Even though older persons comprise eleven percent of the global population, they remain largely marginalized and invisible in society. With this idea in mind, the Committee on Aging in collaboration with the NGO Relations Cluster, agreed on this year's theme: "A Call for a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons".

This briefing was in two segments. The briefing began with the showing of a Montage of photos of older persons from different regions of the world.

Moderator:

Mr. Eric Falt, Director of The Outreach Division,
Department of Public Information

First Segment Speakers:

H.E. Norman Miranda, Chief of Cabinet of the Office of the President,
63rd United Nations General Assembly

Mr. Jose Miguel, Guzman, Chief, Population and Development Branch,
United Nations Population Fund

Ms. Florence Denmark, Chair, Committee on Aging, New York

Keynote Speakers:

H.E. Minister Paulo de Tarso Vannuchi, Special Secretary of Human Rights,
Brazil

Mr. Sergio Zeleney, Chief, Social Integration Branch,
Division for Social Policy and Development,
Department of Economic and Social Affairs,
United Nations

2. The Moderator, Mr. Eric Falt, opened the briefing by explaining the significance of the day. He stressed the need to bridge the gap between the philosophy of the Madrid Plan of action and the real commitment reflected in individual national plans.

Mr Falt also read the message for this day by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. The Secretary-General noted that despite the commitment of member states to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging, in many parts of the world the rights of older persons were violated on a daily basis. The Secretary-General said that more needed to be done at the national level to support older persons, promote their income security, social protection ,ensure quality health care and long term care services.

Mr. Ban Ki-Moon suggested that the International Day on the Rights of Older Persons provided an opportunity to stimulate discussions on promoting the rights of older persons and securing their full participation in society. He called for a redoubling of efforts to achieve the rights of older persons and to make the dream of a society for all ages a reality.

The Moderator, Mr. Falt, now introduced each of the speakers of segment one with their backgrounds.

3. The first speaker, H.E. Miranda, spoke on behalf of Father Miguel D'Escoto Brockman, President of the 62nd General Assembly. Father Miguel D'Escoto, in his message, noted that as a senior himself, he hoped that NGOs shared that sense of pride with him. He was proud to have been entrusted with the presidency of the General Assembly at the age of 75. He hoped that NGOs shared that sense of pride with him.

He said that older persons had the time, expertise and resources to make a big difference in society. He called for NGOs to push for Human Rights to protect the rights of older persons and provide safety nets such as social security, pension plans and the benefits of health, nutrition and psychological well-being.

He indicated that the United Nations can assist governments and agencies to make these generational changes by sharing with them all information contained in its data bases and through its networks of their experts that can guide national efforts.

Mr. Miranda suggested that he would like to be able to recommend to the General Assembly of the United Nations for its consideration the call by some member states and NGOs to provide the momentum to mobilize the awareness regarding the rights of older persons.

4. The second speaker, Ms. Florence Denmark, thanked all who cooperated with the NGO Relations and the Committee on Aging in planning today's program and gave a brief overview of the events organized.

5. At this point, two Oboe selections were provided by Kaori Kato. They were excellent. The moderator, Mr. Eric Falt, introduced each of the two keynote speakers with their backgrounds.

6. The first keynote speaker, Minister Paulo de Tarso Vannuchi, began by stressing that The world's ageing population was a challenge and an issue that the international community needed to address. This was particularly the case in Latin America. He said that the first International Conference of Older Persons that took place in May, 2006 opened opportunities for global society to engage in discussions on these important issues. The conference, he noted, had also revealed that significant challenges needed to be addressed.

Minister Vannuchi pointed to the importance of the 1991 Madrid Plan of Action which outlined the principles for older persons including independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and their dignity.

However, he stated that further work was required. In March, 2008, several countries declared their support for a convention on the rights of the elderly to take place. Minister Vannuchi also described Brazil's work in this area. He noted that that October 10, 2008, marked the five-year anniversary of his country Brazil's federal act for people over sixty years of age. This act by Brazil, promoted public health, culture, sports and recreation for older persons.

Minister Vannuchi reiterated that international diplomacy was vital and that patience and persuasion were equally important to advancing the case for a convention on the rights of older persons.

He reaffirmed that Brazil was committed to an international dialogue on this important subject. In his capacity as the Special Secretary of Human Rights, he will present his ideas of solidarity, and in particular, the monitoring of the fulfillment of these obligations to the Mission of Geneva later this year in November.

Minister Vannuchi noted that this year being the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has helped to focus attention on the rights of older persons. This was important because “ a country that did not look after its older people did not have a soul”.

7. The second keynote speaker, Mr. Sergei Zelenev, began by noting that the International Day of Older Persons was man opportunity for us to not only draw attention to the range of issues affecting older persons, but also to celebrate their contribution to society.

He paid tribute to the numerous roles that older persons play in contemporary society among them, their roles in the family and in the community. This is particularly true of women as caregivers.

Focusing on the issue of the rights older persons, particularly in the light of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he noted that unfortunately the rights of this group were often overlooked at both the national and international levels.

Addressing the issue of the call for a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, Mr. Zelenev said that when talking about the rights of older persons and the need to buttress them, there was a need to take into account the fact that in many cases, older persons were suffering from structural disadvantages in society. These disadvantages cannot be addressed through ad hoc solutions reflected in national legislation on issues such as age discrimination and elder abuse.

He suggested that developing a convention would signify an entirely different level of social protection for older persons. However, Mr. Zelenev noted that a convention would not be an easy job. Further it would require not only a convergence of efforts by many partners, but above all “a clearly expressed political will” by member states.

He indicated that there were many reasons why a convention for older persons were needed.. One of the major reasons being that this group remains vulnerable to many risks and needs special protection no matter where they live in the world. The vulnerability of older persons is an obvious factor of concern, There are moral, ethical and political grounds for the calls for the existence of better legal instruments to protect this particular segment of the population.

Mr Zelenev cited the issue of participation and inclusion as an other important reason for calling a convention. He stated that not everywhere at the national level can the voice of older persons be heard. He stressed there was a need for older persons to be able to effectively articulate their concerns and claim their rights. This would not be possible without clear legal norms. In this context, he raised the issue of the Madrid Plan of Action, which he indicated though a comprehensive document regarding age-specific policies, was not legally binding.

He suggested that the existence of a legally binding convention could give leverage to those whom the convention may serve and add some teeth to the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action. Mr. Zelenev indicated that one of the arguments used by skeptics who question the need for a convention on the rights of older persons was the fact these were already covered under the Covenants on Civil and Political Rights together with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Even though this was a valid argument, Mr. Zelenev stressed that a counter argument was the fact that the existence of these Covenants were not considered by member states as an obstacle for creating at least four separate legal instruments specifying rights for children, women, persons with disabilities and indigenous people.

Citing the success of the recently established Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Mr. Zelenev expressed the view that there were important lessons to be learnt from that process. One was the need to create a platform of shared interests and and find possible solutions for potential disputes. Another was ensuring that the process was dynamic from its inception and that a commitment regarding a convention was clearly expressed by Member States from the beginning of the process.

He stressed that critical to success was the building of partnerships and strategic alliances between governments, the United Nations system, civil society and the private sector. He also stressed the importance of linking the issue of aging with the development agenda. This was an important lesson to be learned from the process which led the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

8. Questions/Answers to Mr. Zelenev and Minister Vennuchi:

8.1 Mr. Sergei Zelenev; More geriatric specialists are needed to help the elderly.

8.2 Minister Paulo de Tarso Vennuchi; More initiatives are needed. More meetings Like this one are needed. We need to address the problem of the elderly in an open manner at the United Nations.

8. Questions/Answers (Cont'd)

8.3 Mr. Sergei Zelenev; Everything depends on the willingness of the Member States Of the United Nations to move this initiative for the elderly forward

9. This was followed by a second musical interlude. Ms. Maria Luisa Chevez , DPI/NGO, welcomed every one and outlined the purpose of the second segment of the program.

Second Segment Moderator:
Dr. Sidorenko, NGO/DPI

Second Segment speakers:
Professor Nana Araba Apt, Ghana

Dr. Lia Daichman, Argentina

Dr. Nabil Kronfol, Lebanon

H.E. Minister Dzamila Stehlikova, Czech Republic

Mr. Manohar Upreti, Nepal

10. The Moderator for this second segment, Dr. Sidorenko, welcomed everyone and introduced each of the speakers of this segment of the program with their backgrounds.

11. The first speaker, Professor Nana Araba Apt, said that the ageing population in Africa Presented them with a significant problem. Urgent attention was needed, especially in The area of education. Professor Apt indicated that improvement in the quality of life for older persons could only be achieved if older persons are treated as development partners.

In this context she recommended that by giving older persons both financial support and access to labor markets would allow them to participate in their own poverty reduction.

Professor Apt noted that the role of civil society was essential to raising the awareness of the need to improve the quality of life for older persons. Further, NGOs had contributed to putting this issue on the agenda of the African Union. Although awareness of this issue had been increasing, she stressed that further work was necessary to ensure that appropriate resources and legislation were put in place.

12. The next speaker, Dr. Lia Daichman, noted that the United Nations Principles for Older Persons had provided Latin America with a working framework. However, millions of older persons are still denied their rights as they have only limited access to health, education and legal services.

Moreover, many older persons have significantly lower incomes and are forced to work beyond their physical capacity. Dr. Daichman suggested that both treatment and prevention were required to reduce the vulnerability of older persons. In particular, "societal abuse" could be reduced if the protection of their human rights were enforced.

In recent years, Argentina has created initiatives to address these abuses. This was done by both increasing investment in social capacity and introducing new policies to educate older persons on their rights.

Dr. Daichman urged governments to work with the international community to address the rights of older persons. She indicated that she believed that this should be viewed as not only a challenge but also as a potential gain.

13. The third speaker, Dr. Nabil Kronfol, talked about ageing in Arab countries and focused his attention on two main aspects, independence and care. He stated that the Middle East region had the largest growing ageing population. This had resulted in both greater demands and challenges for the region compared to other developed countries.

Dr. Kronfol said that the independence of older persons needed to be promoted and their care increased. He suggested that the overarching enemy of older persons was the lack of social policies, which enhanced independence. He also indicated that the level of care in old peoples' was sub-standard because they lacked geriatric services. He further noted that social and economic support to caregivers was also needed.

Older persons were merely recipients of support services but did not participate in the decision-making process regarding their care. Social policies had to be articulated in a more cohesive manner which would allow older persons to have a voice in how they are cared for.

He suggested that increasing the independence of older persons required economic development and increased equitable pension and social plans. The current healthcare system needs to be overhauled and funding increased for both improvements to geriatric care and nursing homes.

Dr. Kronfol noted that Geriatric wards were missing from most hospitals. In addition, he noted that he put forward the view that greater emphasis should be put on among other things, mobile units.

Dr. Kronfol stressed that to achieve progress in promoting the independence of older persons and improving their care required a “multi-sector” approach where governments work with civil society to raise the awareness and advocacy of human rights. He stated that our goal should be the promoting of the rights of older persons “as they age” rather than when they age.

14. The fourth speaker, Minister Dзамila Stehlikova, highlighted the importance of facilitating dialogue to ensure that issues concerning older persons are adequately addressed. Older persons should be seen as the future not the past. She noted that this depends on how governments rose to meet the challenge of addressing their needs.

Minister Stehlikova shared with the audience a number of important initiatives that the Czech Republic had taken to establish an ageing management plan. These plans included supporting the family and improving social services, creating an age-friendly environment, improving both health and health services for seniors, promoting their participation, protecting their dignity and rights.

These plans, she stressed, outlined national priorities, have provisions for monitoring outcomes and offer strong legal protection. Minister Stehlikova noted that the equality of legal rights for older persons was currently inadequate in the European Union since the European Union offered equal legal protection of working rights regardless of age, but did not extend these rights to the areas of education, social security and healthcare.

She noted that there were current proposals to address this inadequacy in the European Union. Minister Stehlikova announced that Prague would host the 2009 Conference on the dignity and endangerment of elderly people. She hoped that this would further promote the rights of older persons.

15. The last speaker, Mr. Manohar Upreti, stated that the lack of progress in the education and healthcare was a growing issue in Nepal. This was because of the increase in the ageing population there and the increase in migration. He stated that initiatives in the area of economic independence were crucial because it would allow older persons to be financially independent and be able to fulfill their economic potential.

In this regard Mr. Upreti outlined a successful animal husbandry project that led to improvements in the economic well-being and health of older persons. He believed that these projects where the skills and interests of older persons were identified, training given and resources loaned at low interest, provided positive benefits for older persons. This, in turn, improved their economic well-being and status within the community.

The challenge for Nepal was to increase their committed resources for similar projects and to make older persons a priority. They also have to provide improvements in healthcare and establish social groups that will allow older people to be more engaged within their communities. This, Mr. Upreti stressed, would also be essential to enhancing the well-being of older persons in his country.

16. Questions/Answers:

16.1 Dr. Lia Daichman: She recommended that we should have geriatrics courses but that these courses should not be restricted to specialists but should include all general doctors.

16.2 Dr. Nobel Kronfol: He questioned the culture in countries toward the elderly. Family support has hindered it because of the culture.

16.3 Professor Nana Araba Apt: She stated that she believed that progress in the treatment of the elderly was increasing but more has to be done.

PDC George Weinstein
National UN Chairman