

## HelpAge Global Network and Partners - Position Paper

# Towards the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2): Ensuring the Voices and Inclusion of Older Persons in a Rapidly Ageing World

### Executive summary

The HelpAge Global Network and partners call on Member States and the UN to place older people and population ageing at the heart of the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2). In the face of a rapidly ageing global population, growing inequalities, and fragile social systems, the WSSD2 is a critical moment to reaffirm global commitments to social justice. Older people, particularly those in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), face systemic discrimination, inadequate income security, and limited access to health and care, all of which must be urgently addressed to ensure no one is left behind.

The paper urges bold, accountable action to recognise ageing as a defining global trend with profound social and economic implications and to promote inclusive policies that guarantee human rights for people of all ages. Key recommendations include expanding universal pensions, ensuring access to quality health and care and long-term care, tackling ageism, prioritising gender equality, and securing older people's participation in economic and social life. By embracing an intergenerational approach and centering ageing and demographic shifts as part of the summit, the WSSD2 can drive lasting progress toward global social justice and sustainable development for present and future generations.



## **Introduction**

We, Helpage Global Network and Partners, committed to the rights, wellbeing, and inclusion of all older people, in their diversity, issue this position paper in advance of the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2).

The WSSD2 represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for re-affirming the commitments enshrined in the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration, for driving strong, tangible, collective and binding action towards the core pillars of social development and global social justice - including poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work for all, gender equality, and social inclusion - and for ensuring that no one is left behind, including older people.

We live in a rapidly ageing world that is increasingly characterised by shocks and crises, including those driven by climate change, widening inequalities, threats to multilateralism and to international solidarity, widespread unrest, and eroding social trust with severe risks of falling short of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The WSSD2 represents not only an opportunity for preventing this; it is an utmost necessity for re-defining a strong, clear, and committed vision for social development and global social justice for people of all ages across the globe, and for ensuring the realisation of their fundamental human rights, which must be guaranteed throughout the entire life course.

In light of the above, we urge Member States, the UN, and all stakeholders to ensure that the Summit delivers transformative commitments through an ambitious Political Declaration and agenda for the WSSD2 that enable the international community to take strong, tangible, and accountable action and that allow for multi-stakeholder dialogue, including civil society, and giving voice to all segments of the global population.

## **Putting older people and ageing at the heart of the WSSD2**

To realise the vision of social development enshrined in the Copenhagen Declaration and in the 2030 Agenda, older people and ageing realities must be placed at the centre of the WSSD2.

We live in a rapidly ageing world - the proportion of people aged 65 and over is projected to rise from 10 per cent in 2021 to 17 per cent by 2050.<sup>1</sup> This demographic transformation brings far-reaching and multifaceted implications for economic stability, healthcare systems, and social dynamics, including family roles and care-giving responsibilities.

Among the opportunities that the trend of population ageing offers, there is the creation of new jobs and the expansion of some economic sectors. Moreover, older people contribute significantly to social cohesion, through their experience and voluntary work. At the same time, the challenges must not be ignored, such as the greater need for robust social systems, particularly in terms of health and social protection. These challenges must be mastered now to ensure a lasting effect, even if they will only have full effect when today's young generations reach old age.

It is imperative that global dialogue, including at the WSSD2, and future policy making take profoundly into account this significant demographic shift, by embracing an in-depth understanding of it and its implications for present and future generations, effectively navigating challenges, while harnessing the opportunities it offers.

The core pillars of the WSSD2 have a strong relevance for older people and an ageing world - from tackling poverty in later life and strengthening social protection systems, to addressing discrimination in all its forms, including ageism, and ensuring decent work opportunities for people of all ages. Systemic gaps, barriers, and inequalities continue to affect the lives of older people globally, undermining their inclusion, wellbeing, and the realisation of their rights. Addressing these challenges is essential for achieving the core aims of the WSSD2 and ensuring that no one, independent of the age, is left behind.

Although there is great diversity in how people age, as people grow older their income tends to diminish, exposing them to poverty, with heightened risks for older people in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and for some groups, particularly older women, older people with disabilities, older refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). Despite significant investments in social protection systems in the last three decades, there are

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), *Leaving no one behind in an ageing world, World social report 2023*, UNDESA, 2023

still more than 165 million older people globally not receiving any form of pension.<sup>2,3</sup>

Despite being a sizable and growing share of the global population, older women face particularly high risks of poverty and exclusion. The global population of women aged 60 and over is projected to nearly double by 2050, increasing from 605 million in 2020 to 1.14 billion.<sup>4</sup> The disadvantages and discrimination that women experience during their lives across multiple domains, spanning education, employment, health, and social participation, accumulate and are often exacerbated in old age. These experiences translate into more barriers for older women in accessing contributory pensions, more limited savings and assets compared to older men, and resulting higher rates of poverty for older women across the globe than older men.

While older people often have the greatest need for health and care services, they are among the furthest behind in accessing them. They face high risks of deaths from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), with most of them living with two or more health conditions (multimorbidity).<sup>5</sup> However, health systems globally remain unprepared to meet older people's rights and complex needs, often lacking integrated, people-centred, and community-based services.

Commitment to and investment in universal social protection systems with national social protection floors guaranteeing basic income and access to essential healthcare services should lie at the heart of the WSSD. This is fundamental to allow older people to live dignified and autonomous lives out of poverty. These should include universal non-contributory pensions (or social pensions) with adequate level of benefits available to all older people, as well as universal health coverage (UHC) that addresses the needs of older people across the entire continuum of health and care services. The latter is critical for older people living with disabilities or chronic conditions.

While it is often perceived that older people are merely recipients of care and support from others, they offer a substantial contribution to the economy and to the wellbeing of the society through both paid and unpaid work. The

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<sup>2</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *World Social Protection Report 2024-26*, 2024

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, *Global Burden Disease (GBD) 2019*, 2024

<sup>4</sup> AARP, *How Women 50-Plus Are Driving The Global Longevity Economy*, 2023

<sup>5</sup> Chowdhury S R et al, 'Global and regional prevalence of multimorbidity in the adult population in community settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis', *Lancet eClinical Medicine*, 5:101860, 2023

latter includes the significant caregiving responsibilities that mostly older women undertake, which often remain invisible and unrecognised<sup>6</sup>. Many older people continue engaging in paid employment in later life either out of necessity or as a deliberate choice. Despite this active role in the labour market, many older workers are denied 'decent' work opportunities, due to ageism and other barriers, including access to life-long learning and digital skills and services.

Regarding older people's enjoyment of their rights, the evidence shows that there is still a long way to the realisation of a world in which older people enjoy full human rights on an equal basis with others.<sup>7,8,9</sup> There is a strong need to promote effective approaches to tackling discrimination against older people and promoting equality of participation, including through relevant binding legal frameworks, such as a United Nations convention on the rights of older persons, relevant regional conventions, and comprehensive national-level anti-discrimination laws.

In light of these realities, it is imperative that the WSSD2 recognises population ageing as a defining megatrend of our time and puts older people at the heart of its agenda to create a society that is truly for all generations. The issues older people face today are not isolated or marginal; they reflect systemic gaps that will affect younger and future generations unless addressed now. This is how the international community can spearhead an intergenerational approach and reaffirm its commitment to social justice, equality, and human rights for all generations.

## **Recommendations for the WSSD2**

We call on Member States and the UN system to ensure that the WSSD2, its agenda and format, and the resulting Political Declaration take into account the following points:

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<sup>6</sup> Age International, *Who cares? Why older women's economic empowerment matters for the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2018

<sup>7</sup> HelpAge International, *Advancing equality for older people*, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Update to the 2012 Analytical Outcome Study on the normative standards in international human rights law in relation to older persons*, 2021

<sup>9</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Normative standards and obligations under international law in relation to the promotion and protection of the human rights of older persons* (A/HRC/49/70).

- **Global population ageing is a megatrend that can no longer be overlooked or minimised.** To protect both present and future generations, governments and the international community must urgently develop an in-depth understanding and raise awareness - taking ambitious action to navigate its challenges and unlocking the opportunities it offers. Population ageing is not a challenge per se, however it can become a challenge if policy systems are inadequately prepared.
- The eradication of poverty and addressing rising income and wealth inequalities should be unambiguous priorities of utmost importance. This calls for **firm commitments and a concrete set of actions towards universal social protection systems and nationally defined social protection floors** as a precondition for social development. This includes promoting universal pension systems including non-contributory (social) pensions with adequate level of benefits, alongside universal health coverage responsive to the needs and rights of an ageing population across the full continuum of health and care services.
- Robust **commitments to gender equality for girls and women of all ages should also lie at the heart of the WSSD2.** Older women's experiences can only be fully understood by adopting a life-course perspective that sheds light on the lifetime of inequalities and discrimination women experience, which accumulate in old age. A Social Summit that fails to adequately prioritise gender equality across the life course will fail half of the world's population - and fall short of the ambition to re-affirm commitments to social development and global social justice and accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda.
- To truly drive progress, the WSSD2 must **ensure concrete, binding commitments, backed by clear implementation mechanisms and accountability frameworks**, for instance in relation to the promotion of universal social protection and social protection floors, as per the recommendations of USP2030 and the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors.<sup>10,11</sup> It is recommended that the intervals for

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<sup>10</sup> <https://usp2030.org/wp-content/uploads/USP2030-Joint-Statement-Social-Protection-for-the-WSS.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/2025/02/achieving-global-social-justice/>

the proposed regular review process do not exceed five years in order to maintain momentum for advancing social development.

- The Social Summit must be a summit for the people, placing the **active participation and voices of those most at risk of being left behind** placed at its core. Civil society must continue to play a role in shaping the outcomes, the agenda, and the dialogue ahead, and in ensuring that the process remains inclusive, accountable, and grounded in lived realities.

## Conclusion

This joint statement reflects our acknowledgement of the unique opportunity the WSSD2 offers for accelerating progress on social development, and our shared determination to work towards a world where no one is left behind and a future in which, from young age to later life, everybody is visible, valued, protected, and empowered.

We call on the international community to seize with ambition and fervour this opportunity to re-affirm commitments and drive action to ensure social justice for all, across all generations.

## Endorsing organisations

### Members of the HelpAge Global Network:

4get-me-not Alzheimer's Organization  
Age International  
Ageing Concern Foundation (ACF)  
Ageing Nepal  
Albanian Association of Geriatrics and Gerontology  
ARDAGER, Kazakhstan  
Asociación Civil Convite  
Association Camerounaise pour la Prise en Charge des Personnes Agées (ACAMAGE)  
Centre for Human Rights and Development Mongolia (CHRD)  
Centro Gerópolis (Universidad de Valparaíso-Chile)  
County Trackers Elderly Organisation  
Dorcas Aid International  
Droits Humains Océan Indien (Dis-Moi)  
Fundación NTD

01/08/2025

Fundación RAFAM Argentina  
Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samti (GRAVIS)  
HelpAge Cambodia  
HelpAge Canada  
HelpAge Deutschland  
HelpAge International  
HelpAge International España  
HelpAge Sri Lanka  
HelpAge Tanzania  
Institute for Development, Research, Advocacy and Applied Care (IDRAAC)  
Institute for Family Health  
Integrated Change Agent (ICA)  
KARIKA KENYA  
Kibera Day Care Centre for the Elderly (KDCCE)  
Kulmiye Pastoral Association (DPA)  
Lesotho Age Network/Help Lesothi  
Life Makers Meeting Place (LMMPO)  
Malawi Network of Older Persons (MANEPO)  
National Age Network of Zimbabwe  
National Senior Citizens Federation Nepal  
National Senior Citizens Organization of Liberia (NASCOL)  
Nsindagiza Organization  
PRO Global/Pensioners without Borders, Sweden  
Resource Integration Centre (RIC)  
Semuto Older Persons Development Association (SOLPEDA)  
Support To Older People-Zambia (STOP-Zambia)  
The Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA)  
Türkiye Emekliler Derneği - Türkiye Retired Persons Organization (TUED)  
Univers de solidarité et de développement (UNISOLD)  
University for Seniors (American University of Beirut)  
Valli - The Finnish Union for Senior Service  
Young Power in Social Action (YPSA)

**Partners:**

AGE Platform Europe  
BAGSO - German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations  
EL Aged Care LTD/GTE  
Fédération Internationale des Associations de Personnes Âgées (FIAPA)  
Fundacja Nasze Pokolenie  
International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG)  
International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS)  
International Federation on Ageing (IFA)  
International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA)  
NGO Committee on Ageing – Geneva