

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS

We are living in the midst of an unprecedented demographic transition; this transition is referred to as an 'agequake'. An 'agequake' is currently defined as rapid population aging in the industrial world as well as the forthcoming ageing in the underdeveloped world. Population aging is profound and has serious financial, legal and medical implications. The aging phenomena will impact pensions, social security schemes, living arrangements and housing as well as family composition, health and health care, legal rights and elder abuse. The UN recognizes the aging phenomena and has explored these issues. Every October the UN celebrates the Day of Older Persons. The aim of the UN is to raise awareness of the many issues facing the elderly and consider strategies and solutions.

The facts are clear. Women are having fewer children and people are living longer. Increases in the proportion of older persons, 60 years or older, are accompanied by declines in the proportion of the younger people, under age 15. By 2050 the number of people in the world over 60 will exceed the number of people under 15. This historic reversal already took place in 1998 in the more developed regions.

The rise in life span is extraordinary. Since 1950 life expectancy increased globally by 22 years from 47 years to 69 years. In the developed world it is about 80 years and in the less developed world it is about 65 years and increasing. For example, since 1960, life expectancy in China has risen from 47 years to 74 years. In 1900, life expectancy was 40 to 50 years in North America and in most of Northwestern Europe. At present well over 80 percent live beyond 65 years.

By 2050 the proportion of older persons will be about 1 in 5; this is equivalent to two billion people. This change is dramatic! Will societies have the resources to cope with the increasing needs of older people? This is particularly urgent when the number of working people is diminishing. How will economic and social life be affected? The underdeveloped countries are least prepared. Some may remember the Beatles song in the 60's? "Will you still need me, will you still feed me when I'm 64?". If the song were written now, the number would be 74 or perhaps 84.

Because of the explosive birth rate of the past some societies are going through a massive youth bulge, with more than half of the people under 25. In the Arab

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countries like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, Egypt and Syria this is the case. Many young in these countries are becoming restless leading to the development of such movements as Arab Spring.

We now discuss in more depth some of the most pressing issues.

Elder abuse: this is widespread and often not reported. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been promoting a global strategy, including education, widespread media coverage, effective interventions by law enforcement officers, social workers as well as the enactment of new legislation to prevent this kind of abuse.

Health: Older people require more health services. In this regards, a problem immediately arises of health care costs and the availability of essential drugs. This is particularly a problem in poorer countries where only one percent of all medicines brought to market by multinational pharmaceutical companies (between 1975 and 1997) were designed specifically to treat tropical diseases (e.g. malaria). The drug companies defend their extraordinary profit margins and their neglect of tropical diseases by pointing to the risk and cost of R&D. However the lions share of new drug development cost involve preclinical research and much of that is performed by universities and government funded research facilities and not by industry. Furthermore, most clinical trials are carried out by these self same pharmaceutical companies in the absence of informed consent from the people they are using as guinea pigs for this clinical trials (as described in the movie entitled the Constant Gardener).

In connection with this issue , Doctors Without Borders has initiated a campaign calling for reduced cost and increased access to medicines needed in the Third World. Dr.Pecould, the organizer of the campaign, says " Drugs save lives. They can't be treated as normal products " He also encourages the marketing and distribution of generics. The topic of drugs is very tricky because drugs are part of the market system and their distribution should not rest on pharmaceutical profit decisions. WHO , for many years has used funding from member countries to purchase and distribute vaccines to poor countries.

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The fact that people are living longer is a major achievement and a reason to celebrate. We have added years to our lives, what kind of life will we add to those years?

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