

**Advancing health and well-being of older persons at the United Nations and beyond: An integrated and multi-stakeholder perspective**  
by Camille Khallouf



*Promotional video for the 2021-2030 UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (screenshot from event recording)*

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or older by the year 2030 (WHO, 2022). Fueled by the rapid ageing of the global population, demand is escalating for robust programs, policies, and activities to improve the lives of older persons. While health generally continues to improve at the global level with achievements being made in targeting communicable and noncommunicable diseases, individuals worldwide are living longer than ever before; yet, research shows that the portion of life in good health has remained constant (GBD, 2019; WHO, 2022). Today, it is essential that public health initiatives increase their focus on extending healthy life expectancy.

Older adults were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with higher rates reported of environmental, social, economic, and healthcare inequalities (Barth et al., 2021; Group of Friends of Older Persons, 2020). The unknown landscape of the pandemic and shifting standards of care produced significant levels of psychological distress, isolation, and anxiety in older individuals (Vahia et al., 2020). All combined, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the challenges and discriminations faced by older adults, which are critically important for all stakeholders to address. Thus, in the ongoing recovery period from the pandemic, it is all the more essential to reduce health inequities and improve the lives of older persons (Seale et al., 2022; Vahia et al., 2020).

This report first provides an overview of historical achievements and challenges to include the needs of older people on the United Nations (UN) agenda since 1982, and its development into a significant UN-wide initiative called the Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030). Subsequently, it covers a hybrid side-event held on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, during the 77<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (GA) of the UN, entitled, “UN Decade of Healthy Ageing: Doing business differently”.

## **Historical Background**

Ensuring the healthy ageing of older adults has been at the forefront of the UN agenda since 1982, with the formulation of the *Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing* (UN, 1982). During the World Assembly on Ageing in 1982, the international framework of action

was adopted for “guaranteeing economic and social security to older persons, as well as opportunities to contribute to national development” (UN, 1982). Subsequently, the UN General Assembly adopted the *United Nations Principles for Older Persons* in 1991, which sets forth 18 rights of older adults “relating to independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity” (UN, 1991; UN, 2022). Within a year, the *Proclamation on Ageing* was adopted during the *International Conference on Ageing* (UN, 1992). The UN declared 1999 the *International Year of Older Persons* and instigated the annual celebration of the *International Day of Older Persons* every October 1<sup>st</sup> (UN, 2002). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in 2002, the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing* (MIPAA) confirmed the UN’s commitment to advancing quality of life and healthy ageing (UN, 2002). The MIPAA became the first guiding framework and landmark achievement outlining the nexus of health, development, and justice for empowering older persons and setting the foundation that to foster longer and healthier lives, development-centered, rights-based approaches to population ageing are needed.

Despite collective achievements in recognizing and advancing the rights of older adults, the pressing need for improving the health and well-being of older persons was not central in the conception of the multilateral *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. This international agreement was adopted by all the Member state governments of the UN in 2015 as a blueprint to achieve 17 global goals, including ending poverty and hunger, ensuring health, gender equality, peace, economic prosperity and environmental protection for all peoples particularly the most vulnerable groups, which includes older adults (UN, 2015). While older persons are a cross-cutting issue, meaning they apply like other vulnerable groups in all goals, some specific mentions to this group are made in the *Agenda for Sustainable Development*. For example, the “nutritional needs” of older persons are directly acknowledged in the mandate of the Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2): Zero Hunger and SDG 11, on Sustainable Cities and Communities, underscores the necessity to provide accessible transport and green space for vulnerable groups, including older adults. Given the inter-connectedness of the goals, protecting and improving the lives of older persons across all the goals needs to be prioritized by every country.

### **The Decade of Healthy Ageing**

Building on the earlier achievements of the MIPAA and UN 2030 Agenda, on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the UN GA declared the decade of 2021-2030 as the Decade of Healthy Ageing (UN, 2020). This Decade of Healthy Ageing is a political declaration for countries’ unilateral commitment and collaboration to guarantee independence, security, and continued productivity for those in later years of life, essentially to advance the health and well-being of older people.

Confirming and celebrating this Decade of Healthy Ageing, a hybrid side-event was held on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, during the 77<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly at the United Nations, entitled, “UN Decade of Healthy Ageing: Doing business differently.” The event was co-sponsored by the United Nations Group of Friends of Older Persons (GOFOP) headed by the Mission of Chile to the UN. The GOFOP was founded in 2013 to promote and develop initiatives within the UN to advance the rights of older persons. The hybrid event was held at the UN Headquarters (UNHQ) in New York City, with panelists attending in-person and participants online via Zoom.



*Flyer for the event on the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (source: screenshot from The Decade of Healthy Ageing Platform)*

### **Event Objectives**

The objectives of the event were to:

1. Combat ageism by changing negative age stereotypes
2. Expand communities that allow older persons to flourish and thrive
3. Provide integrative and accessible health services responsive to older adults
4. Widen access to quality long-term care



*Speakers and attendees in person at the healthy ageing side event of the 77<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly (source: screenshot from event recording). Left to right: Dr. Shyam Bishen, Head of Health and Healthcare, World Economic Forum; H.E. Ms. Kira Christianne Azucena, Chargé d'affaires and Deputy Permanent Representative, Mission of the Philippines to the UN; Mr. Tomás Pascual, Human Rights Director, Foreign Ministry, Chile; Mr. Werner Obermeyer, Director, World Health Organization New York Office at the UN; Dr. Tedros Adhanom*

*Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization; H.E. Ms. Mariam bint Ali bin Nasser Al Misnad, Minister of Social Development and Family, Qatar; Dr. Eiji Hinoshita, Assistant Minister for Global Health and Welfare, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan; Dr. Jane Barratt, Secretary-General, International Federation on Ageing.*

A promotional video, entitled “Adding life to years”, produced by the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, was played at the start of the event to introduce participants to the goals of the UN-wide initiative. The video highlighted how humans need a supportive physical and social environment to nourish their development through all stages of life.

During the event, speakers from governments and international organizations first took the floor, followed by civil society and private sector speakers.



*Slogan for Video on The Decade of Healthy (source: screenshot from event recording)*

## **Key Developments and Innovations**

### ***International Organizations: Leading the Way***

Opening remarks were delivered by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. Dr. Tedros began by stating that ageing of the global population demonstrates our collective successes in targeting and decreasing global rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Despite this positive trend, he underlined the unprecedented challenges we must confront to ensure older people thrive to their fullest potential while ageing with dignity and care: “ageing in today’s world bring its own set of challenges”. To reach the goals of The Decade of Healthy Ageing, he stressed the need for collaboration from international organizations, communities, civil society, academia, businesses, and governments. To protect and promote the health of older people, he said, the WHO has made striking advances by launching a multilingual platform with all available data on ageing and publishing a baseline report and the first Global Report on Ageism.

Subsequently, Dr. Tedros introduced the “Healthy Ageing 50”, an “advocacy initiative” which recognizes 50 stakeholders protecting and transforming the lives of older adults (Healthy ageing 50, 2022). This initiative identifies a diverse pool of innovators leading the change who have been honored, including 36 women, and 29 people from low- or middle-income countries. To extend the current successes, Dr. Tedros listed three priorities:

1. Unilateral and collaborative action through the new Healthy Ageing Collaborative, a recently developed network of change agents to advance the Decade Plan of Action;
2. Addressing the health inequities revealed by the COVID-19 Pandemic;

3. Amplifying the voices of older adults to engage them as active participants in the Decade of Healthy Ageing.

***Government-Supported Local Initiatives: Building Community***

The moderator, Mr. Werner Obermeyer, Director of the World Health Organization New York Office at the UN, introduced Mr. Tomás Pascual, Human Rights Director in the Foreign Ministry of Chile who was representing the GOFOP at the event. The new administration of the Ministry of Social Development in Chile, Mr. Tomás Pascual noted, is deeply committed to advancing the healthy ageing platform in UN headquarters in both New York and Geneva, and in other “multilateral spheres”.

His intervention was followed by a recorded video from Mr. Giorgio Jackson, Minister of Social Development in Chile. “The rights of older persons are not only to be respected because of the so-called ‘vulnerable stage’ they are in life”, he asserted, “but because they have acquired rights throughout their life which still need to be promoted and protected”. The ageist discriminations against older adults, he underscored, are part of multiple and intersecting societal discriminations that intensify at the end of life. He called for a multi-stakeholder approach including older adults as active participants, to address the continuous demographic shift, structural barriers, and lack of normative protections that perpetuate prejudice against older persons.

Thereafter, Her Excellency Ms. Mariam bint Ali bin Nasser Al Misnad, Minister of Social Development and Family in Qatar, introduced how Qatar is collecting internationally comparable statistics on healthy ageing and the country’s experience in improving the lives of older adults. Foremost, H.E. Al Misnad shared that caring for older persons is historically deeply rooted in Qatar religion and culture. To achieve the healthy ageing goals, five initiatives and social programs have been developed:

1. Collecting valuable data to design effective and targeted programs;
2. Launch of the Integrated Care for Older People (ICOPE) program, following the WHO guidelines for evidence-based projects for healthcare professionals to reverse decline in the elderly;
3. Joining forces with the Ministry of Public Health to ensure that needs of older persons are fully covered;
4. Built the “Center Hassan” to serve senior citizens and directly learn from their wisdom and experiences;
5. Reinforcement of the social security system of Qatar to allow older adults to benefit from “an adequate social pension and fully sponsored housing”.

Following her address, the moderator Mr. Obermeyer emphasized the nexus of health and development with other sectors, such as education, social protection, housing, technology and transport. He then gave the floor to H.E. Ms. Kira Christianne Azucena, Chargé d’affaires and Deputy Permanent Representative of the Mission of the Philippines to the UN, who discussed the National Commission of Senior Citizens (NCSC), a national initiative that provides older persons with governmental assistance and discounts on goods and services. While protecting the elderly is also part of the culture in the Philippines, as was described about Qatar, H.E. Azucena underlined that commitment to healthy ageing is further “enshrined in the country’s constitution,” in Article 3 and Article 13 on social justice and human rights. To ensure the country’s constitutional provisions are adhered to, important legislations and policies have been adopted, such as:

1. The Philippines Plan of Action for Senior Citizens (PPASC), which outlines the “strategic actions for the well-being and development of older persons”;
2. Universal Healthcare, which confers necessary and timely access to healthcare for older adults;
3. Implementation of offices of Senior Citizens Affairs in cities and local governments;
4. Long-term care programs for those most disadvantaged;
5. Enactment of the anti-age discrimination and employment law to ensure older adults remain “active members of society”.

Subsequently, Dr. Eiji Hinoshita, Assistant Minister for Global Health and Welfare at the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, took the floor to address Japan’s unique situation as one of the “most ancient societies in the world” and a “forerunner in this area (of ageing)”. The goal of their “Healthy Life Expectancy Extension Plan”, he said, is to reduce health disparity, guarantee the quality of life of older adults, and ensure that “everyone can play an active role in good health for a longer period of time”. Safeguards have been put in place by obligating business owners to secure employment opportunities for older adults up to 65 years old and to give subsidies to those who hire individuals above 65 years old. Additionally, over 300 nation-wide “lifetime active support counters” have been opened by the public employment security office to assist older persons above 65 years old with finding employment.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Dr. Hinoshita explained, recognizes the demographic challenges faced by Japan’s rapidly ageing population, and holds yearly meetings to examine regional measures and initiatives. Since 2017, countries in the Southeast Asian region have been sharing scientific evidence and research to “promote the active and healthy ageing of the population” and to encourage collaboration between regional healthcare professions.

### ***Civil Society: Bridging the gap between stakeholders***

After these interventions from governments and international organizations, Dr. Jane Barrett, Secretary-General of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA), was invited to take the floor as the representative of a large civil society association with official consultative status at the UN and WHO. She highlighted the nexus of the Decade of Healthy Ageing with the “Immunization Agenda of 2030”, a global health program for all individuals to access vaccine services; the “13<sup>th</sup> General Program of Work”, a strategic framework to best mobilize resources and record critical global health advances; The “World Report on Hearing”, a “guidance for Member States to integrate ear and hearing care into their national health plans” and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which all together creates “a very rich tapestry that is a work in progress” (UN, 2020; WHO, 2018; WHO, 2020; WHO, 2021).

Also, Dr. Barrett introduced the IFA’s “Vanishing Project”, an initiative to amplify and weave the “collective voice” of older persons on resilience, pain, courage, and optimism. She concluded by underlining civil society’s significant and distinctive role for strengthening and creating partnerships among the multi-stakeholders.

### ***Private Sector: Essential Support***

Finally, Dr. Shyam Bishen, Head of Health and Healthcare from the World Economic Forum (WEF), spoke on behalf of public-private partnerships to advance the collective effort on healthy ageing. He noted that a collaborative platform is being designed by WEF to facilitate further cooperation between healthcare leaders and to scale-up access to resources for older persons. Furthermore, ongoing initiatives from the WEF include the “Digital Health Action

Alliance” in order to “rethink the way we screen, diagnose and treat chronic diseases that occur primarily in older adults”, and the Davos “Alzheimer’s Collaborative” aimed at strengthening the international response to combat Alzheimer’s disease by uniting stakeholders in the field and encouraging investment in research innovations.

### ***Conclusion: Collaboration and Engagement***

To conclude the session, the moderator Mr. Obermeyer, paid tribute to remarkable leaders from international organizations, governments, civil society, private sector, and communities striving to “make society a better place for all”. He added that the launch of the Healthy Ageing Collaborative announced by Dr. Tedros during the meeting constitutes a formidable opportunity to collaborate and join efforts with academia and all stakeholders in reducing health disparities globally, and ensuring that older adults are engaged by “adding life to years”.

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### Event Overview

**Title:** The UN Decade of Healthy Ageing: Doing Business Differently – UN General Assembly Side Event

**Date/Time:** September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

**Location:** United Nations Headquarters, New York City, USA (Hybrid event)

**Moderator:** Mr. Werner Obermeyer (Deputy Executive Director, World Health Organization office at the UN)

**Panelists:** Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (Keynote - Director-General, World Health Organization), Mr. Tomás Pascual (Human Rights Director, Foreign Ministry, Chile), Mr. Giorgio Jackson (Minister of Social Development, Chile), H.E. Ms. Mariam bint Ali bin Nasser Al Misnad (Minister of Social Development and Family, Qatar), H.E. Ms. Kira Christianne Azucena (Chargé d'affaires and Deputy Permanent Representative, Mission of the Philippines to the UN, Philippines), Dr. Eiji Hinoshita (Assistant Minister for Global Health and Welfare, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan), Dr. Jane Barratt (Secretary General, International Federation on Ageing), Dr. Shyam Bishen (Head of Health and Healthcare, World Economic Forum)

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