



20th Anniversary of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. What is next?*

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Introduction

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Twenty years ago, the Second World Assembly on Ageing adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing – MIPAA (United Nations, 2002). Since its adoption, MIPAA has served as a main policy framework on ageing at the global, national and local levels.

In this policy brief, the author will address two questions:

- What is the correct designation of the jubilee year: celebration, observation, or recognition of failure?
- What needs to be done next in international ageing policies?

40 years of action on ageing

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To begin with, one amendment will be appropriate: the international action on ageing commenced forty, not twenty years ago. The starting point was the first World Assembly on Ageing organised by the United Nations and the Austrian government in July 1982. The Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing (United Nations, 1982), the main outcome of the first Assembly, provided the conceptual framework and practical guidance for policy action on ageing at the national, regional, and global levels.

The first twenty years of national and international actions on ageing produced mixed results: significant progress in meeting the needs and expectations of older people in demographically and economically advanced countries, and policy sluggishness in less developed countries. The pretext for this asymmetric response was the demographic youthfulness of the developing world and its preoccupation with

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myriads of other challenges – political, medical, social, economic. In the meantime, there was growing evidence that demographic transition and population ageing in developing countries would occur on unprecedented scale and at remarkable speed (World Bank, 1994).

Twenty years later, the Second World Assembly in Madrid strived to formulate the universal solutions for addressing the opportunities and challenges of population and individual ageing in countries at various stages of the demographic transition. Appropriate measures were to be proposed for balancing the demographic ageing and the societal development. At the same time, the health, independence, security and safety of older citizens had to remain among the key priorities for policy interventions. Thus, MIPAA reconciled the earlier humanitarian approach to the needs of older people of the Vienna Plan of Action with the new developmental approach of adapting the whole society to ageing.

How far have the member states of the United Nations progressed in reaching the goals and objectives of the MIPAA?

Progress in the implementation of the MIPAA is assessed every five years; the fourth review and appraisal exercise is currently underway and its findings will be analysed in UN fora, at the regional level in 2022 and at the global level in 2023.

Something is going wrong in the world of international ageing policy

The findings of the three previous reviews and appraisals of implementation of the MIPAA can be summarized as follows: in some places there has been distinct progress in addressing the issues of population and individual ageing, while in many other places progress has been minimal, if any. For those who have followed the history of international actions on ageing since the first World Assembly in 1982, this summary looks depressingly familiar. It is clear that something is going wrong in the world of international ageing policy.

Back in 2000, during the preparations of the Second World Assembly on Ageing the UN secretariat attempted to identify the main causes of the insufficient progress in implementing the MIPAA's predecessor, the Vienna Plan of Action. The following main obstacles were disclosed (United Nations, 2001):

- lack of resources, both human and financial,
- low priority of issues of ageing on the policy agenda, and
- weak national infrastructure on ageing.



Similar obstacles were identified in the first three reviews and appraisals of implementation of the MIPAA: inadequate human and financial resources, and weak national capacity on ageing, accompanied or rather caused by a lack of political will (Sidorenko & Zaidi, 2018). The 2013 UN report on ageing (United Nations, 2013) also noted that the implementation of the MIPAA in many countries has not advanced ageing as a developmental priority. The inconsistency between enacted policy and its implementation on the ground remains a persistent hurdle, essentially reflecting limited political commitment on ageing, or, in other words, a lack of political will.

Obstacles at the international level

There are also fundamental obstacles at the international level. One such obstacle is the insufficient coordination of the global implementation process, which in turn is a reflection of the low priority given to ageing within the UN system. The focal point on ageing within the UN secretariat (UN, 2021) remains ludicrously small, with only three professionals overseeing the global (sic!) follow-up process of implementation. Shortage of professional staff at the UN global focal point has been compensated to some extent by shifting the focus of the follow-up of the Second World Assembly on Ageing and implementation of the MIPAA to the regional level under the supervision of the UN regional commissions. Proposals to establish within or outside the UN an international organisation for coordinating and supporting evidence informed actions on ageing have never been supported by UN member states.

Implementation flaws are inherent to the MIPAA itself

Implementation flaws are inherent to the MIPAA itself. It is not a legally binding document, so governments are not responsible for reporting their national implementation progress. Several decades of tireless efforts by non-governmental organisations such as HelpAge International and a few committed governments have not so far ensued a global consensus on developing a legally binding instrument on ageing such as an international convention.

Weaknesses of coordination are also evident in the very marginal technical support to building national capacity on ageing in less developed countries: these days such support is provided exclusively by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, UNFPA – one of the UN family organisations.

Following the first World Assembly on Ageing, substantive support to technical cooperation activities was provided by the UN Trust Fund for Ageing. The resources of the UN Fund, albeit limited, helped to promote the implementation of the Vienna Plan of Action in developing countries and countries in transition.



Shortly before the Second World Assembly on Ageing the resources of the Fund were depleted and never resurrected owing to rather sluggish efforts: all UN resolution calls for fundraising on ageing went unanswered.

One more international fundraising initiative was the establishment in 1991 of the Banyan Fund Association: A World Fund for Ageing (United Nations, 1991). The Banyan Fund was established under the patronage of the UN to support the implementation of the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing. The Banyan Fund was aimed at securing or brokering funds from corporations, foundations, charitable bodies and individuals, and allocate them for specific projects and programmes on ageing, especially in the developing countries. However, the Banyan Fund did not raise a dime and just disappeared from the international scene.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia's invasion in Ukraine have demonstrated that fundraising for ageing issues is practically inconceivable in a politically divided world.

**There is very limited
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Another limitation of the UN Secretariat on Ageing is its very limited analytical capacity to ensure evidence informed implementation of the MIPAA. To establish a solid evidence base for international action on ageing, a permanent database of public policies on ageing on the Internet was proposed about twenty years ago (United Nations, 1998). Such a database, linked to the UN programme on ageing, could ensure a continuous international exchange of expertise and experience in designing and implementing policy on ageing. This proposal, which is still valid today, received specific support from the Dutch government, but was abandoned before 2002 during the preparations for the Second World Assembly on Ageing.

How can the shortcomings in the actions on ageing be rectified?

The twentieth anniversary of the MIPAA offers a pretext for thoughtful analysis and revision of actions on ageing. The ongoing fourth review and appraisal may help identify the gaps. Information about successful models and failed attempts can form the basis for the analysis and revision of international and national policies on ageing. Changes are needed not simply in the procedure of implementing the recommendations of MIPAA, but in our approaches to building a society for all ages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed numerous gaps in national responses and international cooperation in various areas of health, social and economic policy, including policy on ageing. Older persons have become the most obvious victims



of the pandemic and its containment measures (UN, 2020a; UN, 2020b; UNECE, 2020). The current pandemic and the future post-pandemic reality require fundamental changes in policy approaches, including policy on ageing. The most difficult choice is between a cosmetic adjustment and a radical revision. But it is necessary to make such a choice, and the anniversary year provides such an opportunity.

Of the already identified essential measures the following should be given priority:

- **Review and revision of the MIPAA:** The content of the MIPAA and its regional implementation strategies require scrupulous review of their objectives and proposed measures: what needs to be added and what should be removed. Reactive efforts to meet the needs of older people must be complemented by proactive efforts to adapt society to the demographic transition and build a society for all ages, as envisaged by the MIPAA. Persistent measures to promote the life-course approach to ageing and multi-generational cohesion should establish the preventive dimension of policy on ageing. A robust preventive dimension is needed for reducing the negative impact of population ageing and harnessing the potential of mature societies. The world must be provided with a clear vision and practical tools for adjusting to the demographic transition. *In essence, the policy of ageing must be replaced by the policy of longevity.*
- **Establishment of a respected, financially sound, and professionally operated agency to coordinate and support the policy of longevity.** The UN global focal point on ageing needs to be transformed into a real coordinating centre with sufficient financial and human resources for providing technical support and policy know-how. Ideally, an international entity on ageing could be established, preferably outside of the UN.
- **Development and adoption of an international convention on older age rights.** A sound perspective should be given to an international legally binding instrument on ageing, a long-awaited convention (Ataguba et al., 2021).

Crisis creates opportunity, a vision that, since John F. Kennedy's famous remarks (Kennedy, 1959), has inspired efforts to solve problems and turn them into stimuli for development.



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