

Meeting the Challenges of Demographic Change

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Abstract. The shifts in age-group ratios in the population are confronting all continents with new challenges. At the moment Europe is at the top of the old age statistics with the highest life expectancy rate. The changes in the age structure of the population mean new socio-political responsibilities both today and in the future. Participation of older persons in all decisions concerning them, has to apply not only for age policies and social programmes, but also for the design of all kinds of equipment, technical aids, plans for flats or homes for older persons, - including restrooms. EURAG European Federation of Older Persons, welcomes the approach of User Driven Research promoted by the European Commission, GD Research as an important contribution to bringing the European Union closer to its citizens.

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1. Introduction

The shifts in age-group ratios in the population are confronting all continents with new challenges. The comparison between the years 1999 and 2050 illustrates the dramatic rise in the number of older people. United Nations forecasts predict an increase in the number of over 60 year olds from 10 to 22 percent by the year 2050 alone. At the moment Europe is at the top of the old age statistics with the highest life expectancy rate. In the period 1960 to 1995 life expectancy in the European Union rose by 8 years for men and 7 years for women. In 1995 almost one fifth of the population was over 60; by the year 2020 probably one in four will be in this age group. There is a particularly striking increase in the number of the very old by about 40 percent.

The fact that an ever increasing number of people are reaching an advanced age and that these are often years of health and activity can be counted as a very real progress. Yet the changes in the age structure of the population mean new socio-political responsibilities both today and in the future. Both governments and society are called upon to join in facing these new demands.

Demographic change calls for a new definition of the relationship between the generations. The International Year of Older Persons proclaimed by the United Nations

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in 1999 gave an important impetus to this process. It resulted in a heightened awareness that only A Society for all Ages will be in a position to tackle a common future. There are no age limits to make a social political contribution. Older people are busy every day in thousands of ways demonstrating that age is no barrier to embracing new experiences, enriching our communities and enjoying life [1].

Yet, it must not be overlooked that people as they age are confronted with deteriorating health and, often, have to cope with a restricted mobility. Consequently, supportive measures and technical aids are required in order to enable older persons to continue an active life in society even in advanced age.

2. The Importance of User Involvement Strategies

In adopting the Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 [2], the representatives of the Member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, gathered at the UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing in Berlin in September 2002, gave particular priority to:

- Expanding participation of older persons in society and fostering social inclusion and independent living;
- Ensuring equal access to high quality health and social care; as well as
- Supporting older persons, their families, and communities in their care-giving roles.

UNECE Member States – i.e. also all 25 Member States of the European Union - committed themselves to strive to ensure quality of life at all ages and maintain independent living. They stated that: “Older persons, especially those who are dependent on care, must be closely involved in the design, implementation, delivery and evaluation of policies and programmes to improve the health and the well-being of ageing populations.”

In EURAG it is felt that participation of older persons in all decisions concerning them, has to apply not only for age policies and social programmes, but also for the design of all kinds of equipment, technical aids, plans for flats or homes for older persons, including restrooms.

It has proven to be a myth that designers or producers of goods always know what is good for older persons. They might have the best of intentions; however, still they often are faced with reactions by older persons they had not expected. To illustrate this Ad van Berlo, from the foundation Smart Homes in Eindhoven, the Netherlands can be quoted [3]. He spoke about a rather unexpected outcome of their opinion polls concerning the acceptance of smart homes: “It was not so much the difficulty with the technical equipment that irritated the older users, but an aspect of importance was that most residents wanted to keep the control over their house. They wanted to overrule automatic functions or alarms. There was also a fear that the house would not be accessible or usable if the electric power would fall out.”

Such findings clearly demonstrate why it is important to ask older persons (‘primary users’) and also secondary users (‘professional and informal carers’) their opinion: there may easily be aspects important to the users that experts did not think of. It is quite obvious that appliances and equipment, as well as the wide range of technical aids available, help to maintain older persons’ quality of life by enabling them to stay

longer in their own homes, and/or to lead relatively more independent lives even if living in an older people's home or some other institution. Technical equipment such as a more user-friendly rest-room (FRR) –forming the central subject of this book - can support more people for longer in an active community life. Thus, technical aids, or to be more concrete, the FRR will not only improve the lives of the older persons, but also prove to be cost-effective, and it might be one of a range of features and conditions that enable a quicker hospital discharge.

The use of technology as a support mechanism for older persons is, of course, only one part of a whole system to re-shape services for older people in order to improve their quality of life, but it can be an efficient and cost effective part. One of the recommendations in the Implementation Strategy for the International Plan of Action on Ageing [2] says: "Care for older persons with disabilities should promote the maintenance of their maximum functional capacity, their independence and autonomy. [...] In view of the strong demand for providing care at home, it is increasingly important to create effective support strategies for informal caregivers."

The development of the FRR could be one element in a wide range of supportive equipment for maintaining older persons in the community life, without their needing a professional or informal carer for their everyday needs. Thus, the FRR increases the independence, but also the dignity of older persons.

3. User-driven Research As a Way of Representing Older Persons

EURAG European Federation of Older Persons was the partner organisation in the FRR project representing the users' interests. EURAG is an umbrella organisation of older people's organisations in 34 European countries. Its objectives are, among others, to defend the interests of older persons, to fight for their independence and the maintenance of their quality of life. We feel that projects like the FRR project are particularly well suited to help achieve these goals:

- The FRR actually contributes to older persons' independence, thus increasing their quality of life and respecting their dignity.
- The FRR can also contribute to alleviating the burden of carers of older persons with restricted mobility, in particular the burden of informal carers, family members, neighbours and friends, who are frequently rather old themselves.
- Access to a wide range of tailor-made affordable social services that recognise that older people are not one homogeneous group, but rather have different social and cultural needs. This is essential for their well-being, whether they need support to live in their own homes or institutional care. Older persons need to be made aware of the range of social and health services as well as technical aids, such as the FRR, available in their country. This will also be a concern for the future, real-life tests are a first step in making the FRR known, presentation at specialized exhibitions should also be planned for the future.
- Quality of life should be enhanced by ensuring an enabling and supportive environment through appropriate housing policies, urban planning and other measures that provide affordable, barrier free, and age-friendly living

environments. The FRR could very well be a decisive element of such an age-friendly living environment.

- And, finally, it should be emphasized that the FRR project also fulfilled another very important demand formulated in EURAG: participation in decision-making.

By involving users during the whole process of developing the FRR it was guaranteed that older persons could contribute to decisions concerning them.

4. Conclusions

To summarize: User Driven Research reflects key values of socio-political relevance [4];

1. Democracy: user involvement is active democracy, as it enables persons concerned to publicly express their opinions and to actively participate in processes and developments influencing their lives.
2. Equality: research and development initiatives applying user involvement establish equality between producers and consumers in an area where usually the power lies with the producers.
3. Legitimacy: the legitimacy of a product is strengthened when it is developed in collaboration with the population group it is intended for, and even more so when the financial means used for the development of the product come from public funds.
4. Active citizenship: user involvement fosters active citizenship which is a basic condition for an effective local democracy.
5. Participation: every person has the right to participate in society and consequently in research initiatives undertaken in this society.
6. Transparency: research projects and science are elements of society and have, thus, to be transparent, clear and understandable for this society.

Thus, EURAG European Federation of Older Persons welcomes the approach of User Driven Research promoted by the European Commission, DG Research as an important contribution to bringing the European Union closer to its citizens.

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