

Thanks in part to successful lobbying from civil society organisations 2011 and 2012 have been designated the European Years of “Volunteering for active citizenship” and of “Active aging and intergenerational solidarity” respectively. By linking up the political momentum from these two years, NGOs can help to draw out the main

social issues behind them, which include social justice, cohesion and solidarity.

This is why CEDAG is already involved in the debate to help shape the organisation of the Year of Active Aging next year. This week in Brussels we were at two policy discussions with stakeholders from the European institutions, from business and industry and from stakeholder groups including older peoples’ associations and other NGOs. Perhaps the most important message coming out of these meetings is the importance of framing the question of the aging society in terms of impact on society, rather than principally in economic terms.

During a Stakeholder Session co-organised by *Pour la Solidarité*, a CEDAG member, with the Sodexo quality of life observatory, participants posed the question, how can we use senior potential within and outside labour market? Politicians, employers, care givers, associations and citizens all need to work together to agree on strategies to

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create better working conditions, and a better work life balance for all – young and old – according to their needs and lifestyle

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ensure better integration of immigrants to ensure social cohesion and economic stability in the face of a declining autochthonous workforce

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and guarantee the sustainability of public finances.

An analyst from the European Commission pointed out that 2008 had marked an important watershed in socio economic terms – previously in the EU about 1 million people per year entered retirement, but after that date the number doubled to 2 million.

This starkly illustrates both declining workforce and the increased strain on pension pay outs. Indeed the subject of pensions was never far from the top of the agenda in these debates.

But pensions are not the only issue regarding retirement. New pensioners are now more healthy and highly educated than ever before, and the move into retirement, which very often means inactivity, can be a psychological shock leading to feelings of uselessness and frustration, social isolation, and depression. We need a radical rethink of work patterns over the lifetime both in order to keep people active, and to ensure the viability of finances.

Some of the most important areas for action include facilitating autonomous living, which means a physical environment adapted for working and private lives. Working longer means adapting the workplaces, and transport also needs to be adapted. With respect to social integration of older people, it was pointed out that there is an untapped potential role for volunteering.

From the perspective of commercial companies, the point was raised that there are opportunities to develop the business in new services linked to aging. From the point of view of care-giving institutions, however, there is a feeling that there can be risks posed by commercialisation which simply seeks profit – there is an important human dimension to be considered as more important than profit making.

These are the types of different perspective which need to be reconciled so that a fruitful consensus can be reached and turn demographic aging into an opportunity for wellbeing and prosperity in Europe. This desired consensus was a key issue during a policy dialogue held by the European Policy Centre (EPC), where representatives of the European Commission (EC) departments responsible for Health and Consumer protection (DG SANCO) and for information society (DG INFSO) presented a new strategic partnership between them which is supposed to harness innovation and technology in order respond to the challenges of demographic aging. The participants heard that the EC considers this to be one of the biggest challenges our society is currently facing. Age related spending is projected to increase by 5 points of GDP by 2060, and this is clearly untenable unless we take action now to plan and develop our capacities to absorb the changes caused by demographic aging.

Two of the corollaries are a shrinking workforce and, especially, insufficient number of specialists who will be needed to cope with the healthcare and social implications of so many more older people.

A recent consultation held by the EC highlights certain number of issues which will need to be addressed to ensure that active aging is successful. End users, which in this case means older people, their families, care givers, institutions where they work or whose services they use – are not involved in the design and implementation of policy. As a result people don't feel involved in the developments. They don't see the benefits which the proposed developments have for them.

Another problem is related to funding: the complexity and sheer numbers of the funding sources makes it difficult to pursue progress in a coherent way. There are also difficulties related to evidence to support the implementation of strategies: so far it has not been possible to convince people of benefits of proposed developments. Public authorities are unwilling to buy novel solutions. Moreover, health care systems show themselves to be resistant to change, underlining the fact that it is important to involve and inform patients and care practitioners. From the side of the technological developments, the problem of connecting up the different actors in elder care and activity was identified. There are two core dimensions: on one hand innovation which includes all the actors involved in basic research applied research, validation, piloting, take-up; on the other hand active and healthy aging, so actors such as industry, care insurers, hospitals/care institutions, health social care professionals, family, informal carer, and older people themselves. So it involves two complex systems interacting.

There are gaps, for example, between the research and development/piloting stages, and large scale commercial take-up – very few projects make it to the market. It is thought this can be resolved by involving the actors who are in play at the market stage earlier in the development process so there will be more interest, and involving also financiers earlier so that the pilots are taken up and funded to the market. A fundamental problem is that downstream users do not have much influence over the research agenda. Better user involvement would take elderly and their families and care-givers into the early stages of research, basic research.

In the course of the next couple of months there will be important developments in the organisation of the Active aging and intergenerational solidarity year, including decisions about the budget and how the initiative will be coordinated at regional, national, European level. We intend to follow this closely, and be present to make the voice of civil society organisations heard in decision making forums. Therefore, we welcome your views on the matter – if your organisation works with older people and their families, share your knowledge and experience with us.

If you would like to receive a full report of either of the two meetings referred to in this article, please contact the CEDAG secretariat.