

Guido Dumon: For an inclusive society, based on a human rights approach

Ageing, demographic shifts, and the prevalence of ageing societies have emerged as a prominent trend in the 21st century, already evident from the mid-20th century onwards. The concept of "ageing societies" is a result of a growing number of individuals reaching an advanced age, accompanied by declining birth rates. Scientific research has shed light on shifting attitudes among older generations, dispelling stereotypes that presumed an inevitable decline with age. Notably, in 1982, the first World Assembly on Ageing was held in Vienna, bringing together Member States, specialized agencies, and concerned organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing marked the inception of international efforts on ageing, serving as a foundation for policies and actions promoting an inclusive society through a human rights approach. Subsequent plans followed suit.

Given the magnitude of demographic change, governments at all levels are compelled to address the challenges and opportunities arising from these shifts. An Hermans, the president of the European Seniors' Union (ESU), emphasizes that society as a whole must be engaged in this endeavor. This includes a human rights approach, active involvement and participation of older persons, who seek to be active contributors to policies that affect them. Their vision entails building an age-friendly, inclusive society where all generations can thrive.

Numerous associations for older persons have responded to this aspiration, empowering seniors and their organizations. The ESU, in particular, has taken on several initiatives in this regard. Below are some examples of the endeavors undertaken by the ESU.

1. European Seniors' Union: active partner in civil society

The ESU is a vocal advocate and promoter of seniors' interests. Within the ESU's various meetings, including the presidium, general assembly, and regional conferences, a range of critical issues such as anti-discrimination, active ageing, social protection, inclusion, and the creation of an age-friendly environment take center stage. These concerns are also reflected on their website (<http://esu-epp.eu>), in their newsletter (<http://esu-epp.eu/newsletter/>), and their active presence on Facebook (www.facebook.com/esu.eu). The ESU is actively engaged with recent policy initiatives within the European Union, ensuring that relevant information is shared, and a human rights approach is the cornerstone of daily political praxis. This involvement is particularly facilitated through the cooperation with the European People's Party (EPP).



2. Promoting awareness

The ESU, known as the European Network of Seniors' Associations, is committed to promoting awareness about older persons' rights. Every year, the organization "celebrates" special moments and emphasizes the idea of "No ageism" and seniors' right to participate fully in all aspects of society. The ESU encourages all member associations to use it as a "platform to share experiences." Through

collective efforts, a more inclusive and age-friendly society can be created, where the contributions of seniors are respected and valued in every sphere of life.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (June 15), the European Day for Cooperation between Generations (April 29), and the United Nations International Day of Older Persons (October 1 - UNIDOP) all hold significant importance in raising awareness about the well-being and rights of older individuals. Mostly ESU-president An Hermans addresses in a letter to the member associations some aspects of the subject and invites member associations to shed light on this aspect of ageing in their own national or local living environment. Yearly examples can be found on the [ESU website](#).

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day sheds light on the issue of abuse of older people, a grave concern affecting many seniors worldwide. The day serves as a platform to educate society about recognizing and preventing various forms of abuse, such as neglect, financial exploitation, and emotional mistreatment. By promoting awareness, we strive to create a safe and respectful environment for the older generation, fostering a culture of empathy and support.

The European Day for Cooperation between Generations emphasizes the value of intergenerational relationships and cooperation. It encourages solidarity and understanding between different age groups, promoting an inclusive society where the knowledge and experience of older generations complement the energy and innovation of the younger ones. Through intergenerational initiatives, we can bridge gaps, reduce stereotypes, and build stronger communities.

The United Nations International Day of Older Persons celebrates the contributions of senior citizens to society. It advocates for their rights, dignity, and well-being. As the global population ages, this day reminds us of the importance of addressing the challenges faced by older persons and promoting policies that ensure their active participation and respect.



Together, these awareness days remind us to honor and cherish the older citizens, fostering a society that values their wisdom, experience, and unique perspectives. By standing united, we can create a more caring and inclusive world for all generations.

3. Lifelong learning for active citizenship

The ESU ensures valuable learning opportunities in every meeting through information sharing, experiences exchanges, and discussions. Additionally, since 2009, the ESU, in collaboration with the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (WMCES), the Österreichische Seniorenbund and Polak, has been organizing an annual 'Summer Academy' for leading figures in seniors' associations. For over a decade, this event was held in Vienna, but this year (2023), it took place in Leuven, Belgium, with Belgian partners.



The Summer Academy attracts distinguished speakers, making the event even more enriching and insightful. Participants depart from the academy with a

backpack full of newfound knowledge and inspiration, ready to share this knowledge back in their respective communities. This ensures that the impact of the Summer Academy extends far beyond the event itself, positively influencing seniors' associations and communities across Europe.

4. Seniors: Active Voices in Decision-Making

Promoting the active participation of seniors in all aspects of society, including politics and decision-making processes that directly affect them, is of utmost importance. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how stereotypes about seniors belittled and undermined the dignity of older individuals, sparking strong reactions against such attitudes. The ESU, too, called for treating seniors with dignity and encouraged initiatives fostering solidarity between younger and older generations.

Particularly, the focus on the "inclusion" of seniors in the digital society gained significant attention. It became evident that digital literacy and participation in the digital environment were not a matter of personal choice, but rather a collective imperative for everyone to partake in the digital era. The ESU emphasized the need for seniors to be actively engaged in the digital world, ensuring that they do not get left behind and can fully benefit from the opportunities it presents.

In addition to its ongoing efforts, the ESU has collaborated with its members to develop crucial resolutions in recent years, addressing significant issues affecting seniors:

- A. COVID-period Resolution: Titled "Europe's Recovery; Building the future of fair and resilient societies – including all generations," the ESU called upon the EU to implement the valuable lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. The resolution urges the EU to assume an effective and prominent role in leading the Common Strategy, tackling challenges in various domains, and instilling confidence in citizens that the EU, national, and regional governments, along with stakeholders at all levels, are working cohesively. Recognizing the importance of addressing demographic changes, this resolution emphasizes building a fairer and more resilient society. (More information: <http://esu-epp.eu/events/europes-recovery-building-the-future-of-fair-and-resilient-societies-including-all-generations/>)
- B. ESU Statement on Digital Inclusion: In alignment with this statement, the EU Council Department of Media and Information engaged ESU President An Hermans to prepare a comprehensive report dealing with age-related challenges in digitalization and exploring solutions to pressing concerns. The report, titled "*The digital era? Also my era! – Media and information literacy: a key to ensure seniors' rights to participate in the digital era,*" is available in multiple languages on the Council of Europe's website. The ESU firmly advocates for the inclusion of older persons in today's information society. <http://esu-epp.eu/events/launch-of-media-and-information-info-brochure-by-an-hermans/>
- C. Care Strategy Resolution: During discussions, ESU delegates highlighted the instrumental role played by the European People's Party (EPP) in contributing to the development of the EU's Care Strategy. The resolution, titled "The New European Care Strategy: towards affordable quality care for all people who need it," emphasizes the importance of providing accessible and high-quality care to all who require it. You can find the complete resolution document here: http://esu-epp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/EN_ESU-Resolution-European-Care-Strategy_final.pdf.

These resolutions reflect the ESU's commitment to advancing seniors' rights and ensuring their active participation in contemporary society, advocating for fairer and more inclusive policies and strategies.

- D. Recently, the ESU and its member associations criticized the EU Commission's draft on driver's licenses, citing concerns about elements of 'age discrimination.' MEPs were invited to revise the text and remove the contentious elements to address this issue.

5. Conclusion

The ESU forms an inspiring community of volunteers, driven by their engagement in the development of European societies and the well-being of their fellow citizens. Acting as intermediaries, they bridge the gap between their national associations and European policymakers. The core objective of the ESU is to realize a human rights approach in aging policies and advocate for older persons' rights throughout their entire lifetime. A characteristic aspect of their work is empowering 'active citizenship' at various policy levels through education and political action. With their profound knowledge of European history and dedication to volunteer work, older persons within the ESU contribute to an inclusive and just society where the voices of seniors are fully heard and respected.