Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1428 (1999)[1]

Future of senior citizens: protection, participation, promotion

Parliamentary Assembly

1. By declaring 1999 as the "International Year of Older Persons", the United Nations has launched a discussion on the theme "Towards a society for all ages". Its main objective is the "promotion of the United Nations principles for older persons". The operational framework consists in "raising awareness, focusing on the theme of a society for all ages", "encouraging looking ahead, beyond 1999", "reaching out to non-traditional actors" and "improving networks for research and information exchange".

2. The initiatives undertaken within the Council of Europe in recent years demonstrate that it shares these concerns with regard to older people. In this respect, the Assembly welcomes the fact that the declaration of the 2nd Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe placed social policies at the heart of its priorities: it also welcomes the setting up of the Group of Specialists on Optimising the Living Conditions of Elderly Dependent People (CS-CV) and the 1998/1999 research field "elderly persons within their family -legal and social responsibilities". Recently, the European Health Ministers devoted their 6th Conference (Athens, 22 and 23 April 1999) to the question of ageing in the twenty-first century: the need for a balanced approach toward healthy ageing

3. Population ageing in Europe represents a major challenge for the years ahead; however, we need to start planning for it today. The countries undergoing transition, as well as other European countries, are experiencing, or will experience, important reforms to their pension funding systems, with painful consequences for a significant proportion of the elderly population, consequences which demand that we acknowledge the importance of what has been achieved in terms of protection. However, the challenges of social policy in our ageing societies are the subject of a separate report.

4. The situation of senior citizens in rural areas warrants special consideration in view of the particular features of the rural and farming environment and the significant disparities between senior citizens living in rural areas. In order to reduce these inequalities, the Assembly encourages interregional co-operation initiatives, on the part of associations and NGOs, among others, and particularly with regard to the isolation of senior citizens, which is much more acute in rural areas. The Assembly wishes to promote the revitalisation of the rural environment and its heritage to enable both senior citizens and the younger generations to live a dignified life.

5. The social importance of the elderly in family life cannot be underestimated. The family is the basic structure in which the individual traditionally learns his or her social role, receiving a human heritage from his or her elders. Although conscious that mentalities and cultures change, and of the social and economic imperatives existing in Europe, the Assembly wishes to reaffirm the importance of the family in creating a social link between the generations, and argues in favour of it being restored to its rightful place. Respect and care for the elderly are key elements in this quest.

6. Another sign of the times is that a growing proportion of those whose working lives have ended are now seeking to remain socially committed, through charitable, voluntary and exchange activities. These men and women are refusing to let themselves be considered as incapable of playing a useful role in the community after retirement: their participation should therefore be encouraged and developed. In addition, some people

1. Assembly debate on 23 September 1999 (31st Sitting) (see Doc. 8461, report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Hancock). Text adopted by the Assembly on 23 September 1999 (31st Sitting).

suffer on account of the image of elderly people that modern society reflects. This new wave of social commitment should be supported both for the benefits it directly provides to society and the elderly themselves, and for its potential role in reversing the frequently negative image of retired and elderly people.

7. The Assembly notes the importance of allowing for the differences in the situation of elderly people in the north, south, east and west of Europe, and between the elderly living in urban and rural environments, and remains convinced of the need to develop collaboration with the United Nations and representatives of the voluntary sector and non-governmental organisations, which are able to assist in understanding and monitoring national situations.

8. In the same spirit, activities to observe national situations over prolonged periods seem to produce the best results: in particular, they enable changing circumstances to be taken into account and represent a source of invaluable information and examples of good practice, for example in the fields of housing, services or care provision for elderly people. Bearing in mind the phenomenon of the ageing of the population and its numerous facets, which go beyond issues of dependence and relations with the family -it is a question of human dignity and the rights of old people -the Committee of Ministers and the member states should provide for the implementation of systems for observing the lives of retired and elderly people at both European and national level.

9. In the same way, research on the retired and elderly population should be supported and encouraged at national level, bearing socio-professional categories in mind, particularly in the light of the specific features of the rural environment.

10. At the level of the Committee of Ministers and the member states, the activities already undertaken in favour of older people should be continued. When preparing and implementing future national and Council of Europe policies, account should be taken, inter alia, of the guidelines drawn up by the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation No. R (94) 9 concerning elderly people, and by the Parliamentary Assembly in its Recommendation 1254 (1994) on the medical and welfare rights of the elderly: ethics and policies.

11. The Assembly requests the Committee of Ministers to invite the recently created European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS) to study the possibility of including in its work programme an activity that would address the urgent aspects of the concerns expressed in this recommendation.

12. In some European regions, which have been badly affected by the transition process or by conflict, the situation, particularly the financial situation, of elderly people is especially worrying, and is sometimes a matter for humanitarian emergency relief. The Assembly invites the Committee of Ministers to request member states to provide all necessary assistance to the states concerned and to organisations working on the ground.

A. With regard to the protection of retired and elderly people:

13. On the occasion of the International Year of Older Persons, the Assembly requests the Committee of Ministers to invite the member states to adhere to the international instruments that give particular consideration to older people, and launches a solemn appeal in favour of the European Social Charter (and revised Charter) and its 1988 Protocol, Article 4 of which is specifically devoted to elderly people.

14. The threats that weigh particularly heavily on elderly people (delinquency, physical and psychological ill treatment, abuse of trust, and so on) are matters of concern, and it would be appropriate for states and local authorities to prepare specific responses to these threats and to the ways in which they are realised, such as:

14.1. new measures to make it easier for elderly people to move about, especially in the evenings, cheaply and safely;

14.2. legal measures in civil, criminal and consumer matters;

14.3. awareness-raising and training of welfare and medical staff to detect mistreatment in any environment in which the elderly may be living (family, institution, and so on);

14.4. information services for elderly people, to assist in preventing and punishing such mistreatment, with particular attention to drug misuse in institutions

15. Elderly people who are socially excluded constitute a group which requires special, flexible responses on the part of society, in particular in the health field: states must ensure that humanitarian assistants, social workers and medical staff are trained to deal with these people.

B. With regard to participation by retired and elderly people:

16. In order to contribute to social cohesion and the active ageing of older people, the Assembly requests the Committee of Ministers to ask member states to take the following proposals into account:

16.1. more flexible legislation with regard to retirement or recruitment ages, which would enable those who have the skills necessary for employment and who wish to do so to remain working;

16.2. access to education and training in new technologies such as, for example, Internet should be guaranteed irrespective of age;

16.3. the use of a "gentle" transition to retirement, such as a gradual reduction in working time;

16.4. retired people, or those moving towards retirement, and elderly people require specific information, both with regard to their status and the facilities and services available to them. Services providing this kind of information play an important role in the prevention of social exclusion;

16.5. those involved, and especially the social services, should be made aware of the existence of a growing and wide-ranging voluntary sector and should work to help this new sector connect with volunteer opportunities by facilitating exchanges of information between those who wish to offer their services or knowledge and potential beneficiaries;

16.6. to pursue efforts to develop an associative network of retired and elderly people and give local authorities the means to support this development through legal, financial and structural measures;

16.7. to encourage local authorities to develop experiments to associate elderly people with decision-making processes and to involve representatives of the associative world with retired and elderly people at national level;

16.8. to identify meeting places and find new ways of promoting inter-generational exchanges of experience, thereby ensuring the transmission of the knowledge and know-how of senior citizens in areas such as education, art, research, business, history, tradition, crafts, rural and agricultural activities, and so on, and to promote initiatives aimed at drawing the attention of the various youth training organisations and employment agencies to these activities and the potential of these sectors;

16.9. to provide for initiatives to bring retired and elderly people into closer contact with the new communication technologies;

16.10. to raise public awareness of the issue of the responsibilities of elderly people towards themselves and society, especially by preparing for ageing and remaining active.

C. With regard to the image of retired and elderly people:

17. Having regard to respect for individual dignity, strengthening the links between generations and the general need to encourage a different image of retired and elderly people, the Assembly requests the Committee of Ministers to authorise its relevant committees of experts to consider the possibilities of:

17.1. raising awareness amongst those involved in the media and advertising worlds as well as intellectuals and other opinion formers, of the need for an image of retired and elderly people that is closer to reality, and more positive;

17.2. initiating communication activities that encourage a positive and respectful image of retired and elderly people;

17.3. encouraging the use, particularly in public services, of a vocabulary and conceptions that do not project a negative image of retired people; this is especially relevant to the terms used to describe this section of the population

18. In pursuit of the same objective, a campaign in favour of retired and elderly people "Senior Citizens 2000" could be launched under the auspices of the Council of Europe. Such a move would be aimed at following up the results achieved at domestic level by the member states in the International Year of Older Persons and supporting their policies to promote a positive image of the "third age".