Policy brief

UNECE

Mainstreaming ageing - revisited

Contents

Challenging context

The proportion of people aged 65 years and above will increase from 16.8 per cent in 2020 to 24.5 per cent by 2050 in the UNECE region. This demographic shift will have an impact on almost all aspects of society. A comprehensive and forward-looking policy response that anticipates, prepares for, and mitigates the impact of population ageing on the economy, society and different generations is needed.

A future-oriented approach can seize the opportunities that ageing populations bring by enabling individuals to age healthily, learn and continuously develop new skills, extend their working lives, participate in and contribute to societies in diverse and meaningful ways at all stages of their lives. Inaction, on the other hand, may lead to increasing financial burden, shortages of skilled labour, strains on health and care systems, and intergenerational inequity if the risks and costs of population ageing are unfairly distributed. It is therefore important to take decisive action now to better anticipate and prepare societies for the future to ensure sustainable social protection systems, thriving economies, prosperity, and well-being for all generations.

Suggested strategies

This policy brief highlights several levers to advance the integration of ageing into public policies:

- Political and executive leadership for mainstreaming ageing
- A strategic framework for mainstreaming ageing
- Strengthened governance and mechanisms for effective horizontal and vertical inter-institutional coordination
- Agreed procedures for age-sensitive analysis, such as regulatory impact assessments and age-responsive budgeting
- Strengthened capacity for mainstreaming ageing
- Enhanced awareness, data collection and analysis to inform policy
- Participatory policymaking at all levels

Expected results

A more effective integration of ageing into all policies at all levels will enhance preparation for and adaptation to population ageing and achieve a more equitable development within society that will benefit all age groups.

With country examples from:

Armenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey.

This policy brief addresses **Commitment 1 of the Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 16, 17.**
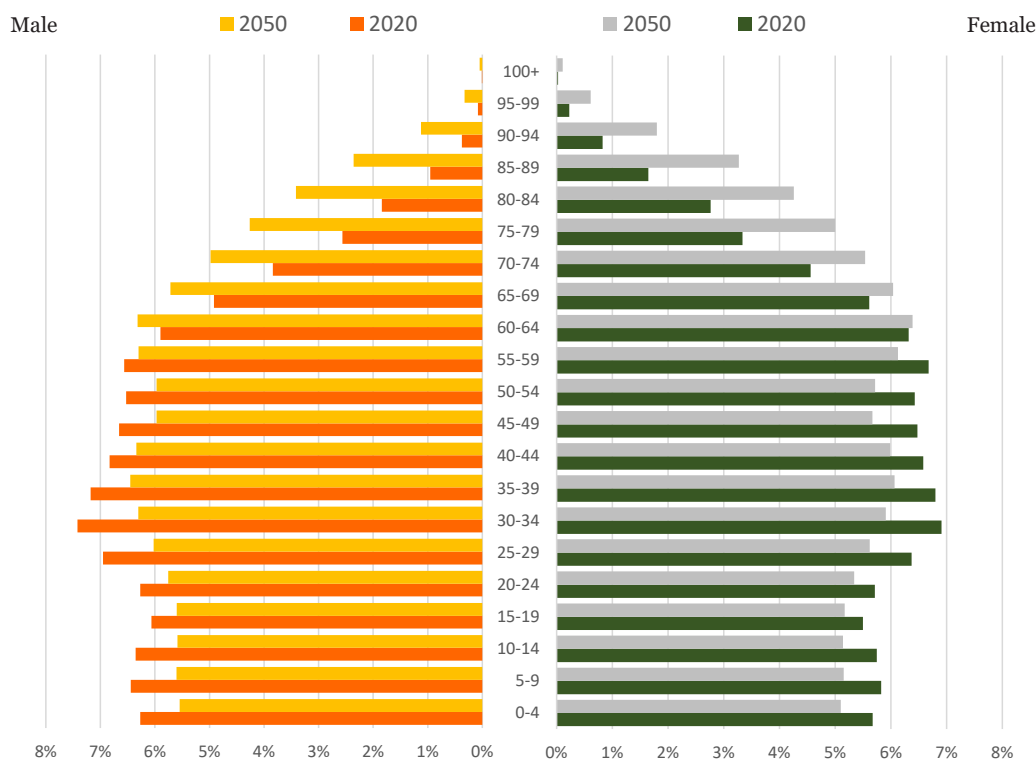
United Nations

Introduction

Population ageing has social and economic implications for which societies need to prepare and to which they need to adapt. This requires a coordinated, whole-of-government and whole-of-society effort.[1]

Mainstreaming ageing as a recommended policy strategy was first introduced in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), 2002, calling for the integration of ageing into broader policy agendas on social and economic development and human rights. In the regional implementation strategy for MIPAA, UNECE member States committed to mainstreaming ageing with the goal of securing "gender-sensitive and evidence-based coordinated and integrated policies to bring societies and economies into harmony with demographic change" (MIPAA/RIS). The first UNECE Policy Brief on Ageing in 2009 defined mainstreaming ageing as "a strategy, process and multi-dimensional effort of integrating ageing issues into all policy fields and all policy levels" with the "ultimate objective (....) to achieve a more equitable development within a society that will benefit all social groups".[2]

Twenty years onwards from the adoption of MIPAA/RIS, considerable progress has been made at all levels to enhance political attention and action on ageing and develop cross-cutting policy measures to respond to the challenges and realize the opportunities of ageing societies. The concept of mainstreaming ageing itself has evolved from a narrower focus on mainstreaming the concerns of older persons across sectorial policies to a more holistic, life-course oriented, gender-responsive, human rights-based and equitable approach that integrates the needed dual response to both population and individual ageing.[3] The present policy brief revisits mainstreaming ageing by reviewing recent advances in this field, and calls for action to make the integration of ageing into broader policy agendas more systematic.

Figure 1
UNECE population structure by 5-year age groups and gender, 2020 and 2050

Source: ECE calculation based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision.
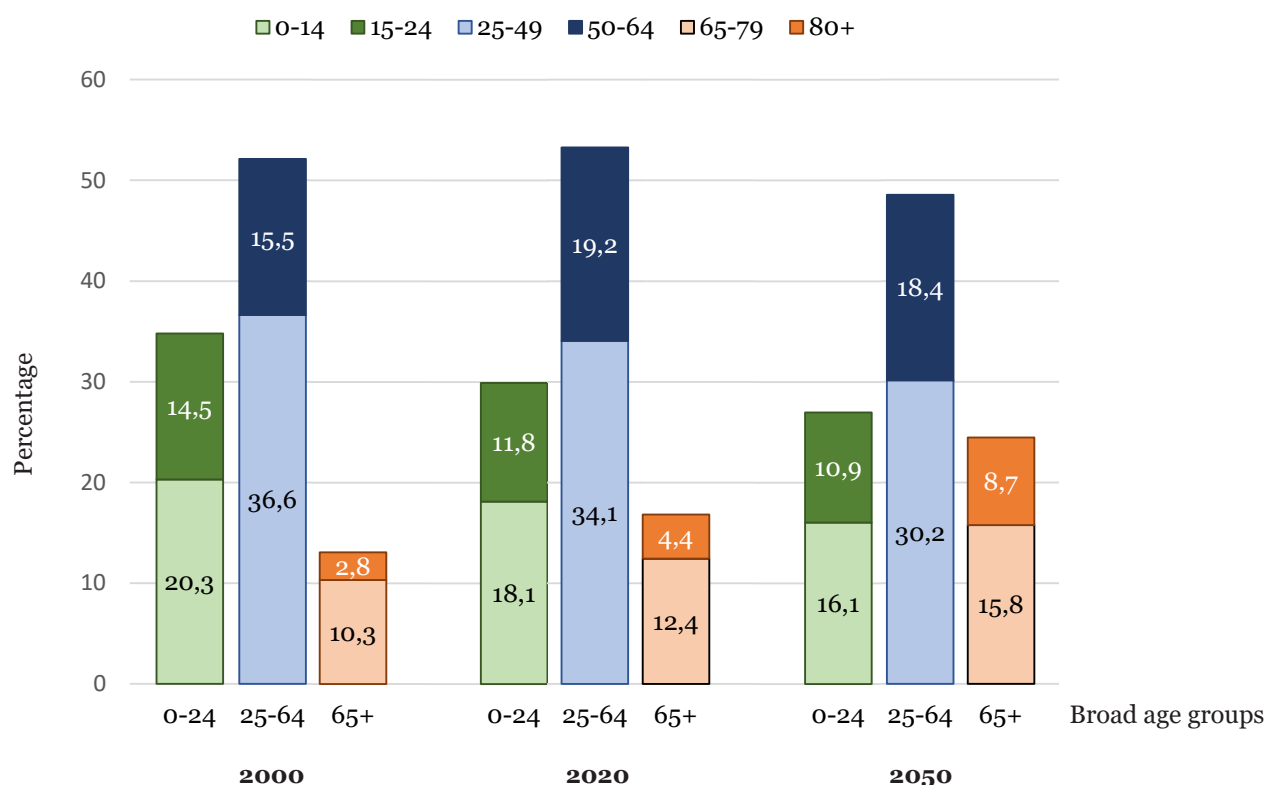
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[1] UNECE 2021e.
[2] UNECE 2009.
[3] UNECE 2021a.

Population ageing and sustainable development in the UNECE region

People in the UNECE region are living longer. Life expectancy at age 65 has increased from 16.3 years in 2000 to 18.9 years in 2020. This constitutes about two and a half additional life years gained since the adoption of MIPAA 20 years ago. Life expectancy remains higher for women than men. Women aged 65 today can expect to live another 20.3 years compared to 17.2 years for men on average in the UNECE region.[4]

A shifting age structure

The proportion of people aged 65 years and above is projected to increase in the UNECE region from 16.8 per cent in 2020 to 24.5 per cent by 2050. At the same time, the share of children and youth (aged 0-24) is projected to decrease from 29.9 per cent in 2020 to 27.0 per cent in 2050 (see Figures 1 and 2). Averages of course mask regional diversity. In 16 countries of the UNECE region, older persons (aged 65 years and above) already make up over 20 per cent of the population, with the most aged populations living in Italy, Portugal, Finland, and Greece (over 22 per cent). By contrast, in four countries of Central Asia, the proportion of people aged 65 and above is still below 5 per cent (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan), though it is projected to double by 2050.[5]

Figure 2
UNECE population by broad age group, percentage in 2000, 2020, and 2050

Source: ECE calculation based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision.

The median age of the population in the UNECE region is continually rising. It increased from 35.5 years to 39.5 years between 2000 and 2020, and it is projected to reach 43.9 years by 2050.[6] Ten UNECE countries led by Italy, Portugal and Germany already today have median ages above the regional average projected for 2050.[7]

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[4] UNDESA World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] According to the UNDESA World Population Prospects, the median age in Italy was 47.3 in 2020, 46.2 in Portugal and 45.7 in Germany.

An ageing workforce

The gradual shift in the age structure of the population impacts the workforce and the ratio between those of working age and those below or above it.[8] As is the case for the general population, the median age of the working population is rising.[9] The proportion of its overall size will be falling as fewer young people enter the workforce while large population cohorts, the baby boomers, have or soon will be reaching retirement age (see Figure 1). This can lead to staff shortages in certain sectors unless mitigating measures are taken.

In 2000, there were 5 people of working age (15-64) for every person aged 65 and above in the UNECE region. This figure has fallen to 3.9 in 2020 and population projections estimate that there will only be 2.4 persons of working age for every person aged 65 and above by 2050.

The working population finances most public budgets through their contributions. It will be difficult for a shrinking working-age population to support the pension payments, health and care expenses, among others, for a growing proportion of pensioners - unless more people work significantly longer in the future, or the source of state incomes and the distribution of financial resources are altered. Enabling longer working lives through investments in lifelong education, age-adapted workplaces, reforms in employment and retirement policies, to name but a few, are key mitigating measures preparing for this shift in age structure.[10]

Rising demand for health and long-term care services

The use of health and care services increases with age. Especially, people of advanced age (80+) require health and long-term care services, and their proportion in the total population has increased from 2.8 per cent in 2000 to 4.4 in 2020 and is expected to double to 8.7 per cent by 2050 (see Figure 2). Preparing health and long-term care systems for growing demand, and promoting healthy ageing, is therefore a key priority for societal adaptation to demographic ageing.

Growing old in smaller and more diverse families

The size and composition of families change. People have fewer children and many older persons, especially women, live alone.[11] According to the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, on average 86.8 per cent of people aged 75 and above either live in a single-person household or live as a couple.[12] This has important implications for the ability of families to provide support and care for older relatives who need it. Most of the care provision for older persons has been and is being provided by family members, but the potential 'pool' of family carers is shrinking as the number of children decreases.[13] This requires adjustments in the way support and care in families and communities is provided. It puts priority on enabling measures that support the reconciliation of paid work and unpaid care, healthy ageing, and independent living in older age.

Demographic change challenges urban and rural areas in different ways

With increasing urbanization of the UNECE region, most people grow old in urban areas.[14] As it is mainly the young and working age population who migrate to the cities for higher education and work opportunities, many rural areas already today experience more accentuated population ageing through population decline.[15] Societal adaptation to population ageing needs to be sensitive to the diversity of challenges – and opportunities – that demographic change implies for local and regional development. Policies should aim to reduce and prevent growing inequities in living standards, opportunities, and access to services based on the place of living.

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[8] The working-age population is typically defined as those aged 15 to 64, i.e. the age group between the end of compulsory education in majority of countries and retirement age. In practice, however many young people remain in full-time education beyond age 15, and numerous older adults remain in labour force after the age of 65.

[9] ILOSTAT – Data on Median age of the labour force https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/population-and-labour-force/.

[10] UNECE 2017.

[11] UNECE 2020.

[12] See 2020 AAI EU results for the indicator 3.3 (https://statswiki.unece.org/display/AAI/II.+Results).

[13] UNECE 2019.

[14] UNECE 2020.

[15] European Commission 2021a.

Migration flows impact the speed of demographic change

Demographic change, including through domestic and international migration, is leading to population decline in some countries (and regions) in Central, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Europe.[16] International migration of skilled labour that temporarily helps address staff shortages, including in the health and care sector of more aged societies, in turn poses significant challenges for countries with outmigration of the working age population.

People age in an environment of transformative economic, environmental, social, and technological change

It is important to consider demographic change in the context of the broader trends and challenges that mark our era, bringing challenges as well as opportunities for societal adaptation. The characteristics of future generations of older people will change – they will be more educated and digitally connected than older generations today. Today's youth is ageing in an environment that differs significantly from that experienced by previous age cohorts. Hence, their individual as well as collective life experiences and opportunities in areas as diverse as education, technology, housing, family formation, work-life balance, job security, social protection, healthy environments, peace, and security will be different.

The ongoing demographic transition in the region will shape the society of the future. Population ageing challenges current welfare systems, labour markets, and economies, while influencing the conditions for future social and economic development. That said, the costs of ageing can be mitigated, and the potentials of healthy longevity be realized, through adequate preparation. A future-oriented policy response depends on understanding the transformative power of demographic change in interaction with other key factors shaping our time: globalisation, growing inequalities, environmental degradation, climate change, global migration, digitalization, and the changing nature of work, to name but a few.

Population ageing and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The comprehensive, cross-cutting, and universal nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, and the actions required to implement it, provide an opportunity for integrating an ageing perspective in forward-looking international and national development agendas. In the context of its pledge of 'leaving no-one behind', the agenda addresses children, youth, and older persons in vulnerable situations in several of its development goals and targets.

The objectives of sustainable development and bringing societies and economies into harmony with demographic change are closely connected. Ageing-related policies contribute to fulfilling the goals of the 2030 Agenda by enabling people of all ages to contribute to sustainable development as 'active agents of societal development'.[17] For example, Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for better access to quality education and the development and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities and continued skills development throughout the life course. This is key to preparing individuals for longer productive lives by ensuring that their skills and knowledge are and remain relevant to labour market developments and technological change throughout and beyond their active working lives. Figure 3 provides an overview of contributions of ageing-related policies towards achieving the sustainable development goals.

An overview of ageing-related policies and priorities in voluntary national reviews (VNRs) shows that out of the 158 submitted VNRs between 2016 and 2019 over two thirds included some reference to ageing. Many acknowledged that population ageing would have implications for the achievement of the SDGs including increased demand for basic services, the need to adapt physical environments to the needs of older persons and increased pressure for funding of social services, healthcare, and pensions. Several countries mentioned older persons under specific SDGs, but the review also noted that ageing-related policies and priorities are still absent in many national plans and sustainable development strategies.[18]
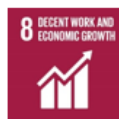
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[16] Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, and Ukraine had negative population growth in 2020 according to World Bank Data. Among them, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Montenegro, Poland, and Republic of Moldova had a negative net migration rate for the period 2015-2020, meaning that there were more people emigrating from the countries than people migrating to the countries.

[17] United Nations, HelpAge International and AARP, 2017.

[18] UN DESA 2019.

Figure 3
Adaptation to population ageing contributes to sustainable development

1. Population ageing can spur economic growth while maintaining fiscal sustainability, but policies and behaviour play important roles.

2. Establishing universal social protection with adequate benefits is key to reducing poverty and inequality and to promoting social inclusion (SDGs 1, 8 and 10).

3. Promoting lifelong health and preventive care to maintain maximum functional capacity of individuals can improve health and wellbeing (SDG 3).

4. Investing in education and health and well-being for all, including lifelong learning, can improve productivity and maintain economic growth even as the share of working-age population shrinks (SDGs 3 and 4).

5. Promoting gender equality in employment and adopting family-friendly policies can improve labour force participation and lead to more rapid economic growth (SDGs 5 and 8).

6. Fostering a balanced approach to financing old-age consumption can help to ensure generational equity and fiscal sustainability (SDGs 8 and 10).

7. Adopting social security reforms that consider the widening gap in longevity by socio-economic status can help reduce inequality (SDG 10).

8. Creating age-friendly cities and communities contributes to making cities and human settlements inclusive and safe (SGD 11).

9. Eliminating age-related discrimination, including age barriers in employment, can reduce inequality, increase productivity and promote economic growth (SDGs 8, 10, and 16).

10. Improving data collection and analysis of population and economic linkages can provide vital new evidence for policymaking (SDG 17).

Source: Adapted from UNDESA World Population Ageing 2019: Highlights, p. 27-28 on Policy implications for achieving the SDGs.

Mainstreaming ageing revisited

MIPAA called upon national governments to mainstream ageing and the concerns of older persons into national development frameworks and poverty eradication strategies. It further highlighted the importance of institutional follow-up through the establishment of agencies on ageing and national committees, including civil society representatives and organisations of older persons, which could serve as national advisory and coordinating mechanisms on ageing. It stressed the important role of effective organization of older persons, educational, training and research activities, data collection and analysis, including gender- and age-specific information for policy planning, monitoring and evaluation for the plan's implementation.[19]

Despite the considerable progress in ageing-related policy made over the past 20 years, the development of more systematic approaches to mainstreaming ageing is still in its early stages – both at international and national level. To support countries with the systematic integration of ageing issues in social and economic development agendas, the UNECE Standing Working Group on Ageing issued new Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing in 2021 (see Box 1).[20] They recommend building a mainstreaming approach that is human rights-based, life-course-oriented, evidence-based, gender-responsive and equitable, and aligned with relevant international policy agendas.The Guidelines call upon governments to consider ageing from both a societal and individual perspective, recognizing and addressing the diversity in needs, rights, and opportunities at all ages through coordinated and integrated policies. A life-course perspective on ageing shifts attention from a focus on older age to considering the evolving needs, and vulnerabilities, of individuals across their entire life span. All generations are impacted by demographic change and are instrumental in bringing policy adaptations to success.

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[19] MIPAA, 2002, para 119.
[20] UNECE 2021a.

BOX 1
UNECE Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing

The Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing provide policymakers with suggestions on how to advance or improve their mainstreaming efforts, considering ageing both from a societal and individual life-course perspective. They outline five stages that support countries in establishing a Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Ageing:

Stage 1 - Getting Started - outlines preparatory activities, including making the case for mainstreaming, securing political commitment, carrying out a stakeholder mapping and analysis and setting up a team to develop the Strategic Framework.

Stage 2 - Analysis - proposes to carry out a situation analysis and take stock of the policy context, data situation and existing mainstreaming mechanisms to identify the gaps.

Stage 3 - Vision and Directions - focuses on identifying the strategic directions for the Framework and supports formulating the vision, goals, objectives and expected outcomes for mainstreaming ageing.

Stage 4 - Identification of Activities - helps defining specific activities to support mainstreaming ageing. Emphasis is put on the importance of instituting a coordination mechanism and selecting implementing partners.

Stage 5 - Monitoring and Evaluation - suggests establishing a mechanism that helps measure and evaluate progress over time and fosters continual adjustment and improvement of mainstreaming efforts.

The Guidelines are available on unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing.

Key enablers for the integration of ageing into broader policy agendas

The following sections discuss progress made across several key dimensions of mainstreaming ageing, and identify steps that could be taken to strengthen the integration of ageing into broader policy agendas going forward.

Political and executive leadership

As populations age gradually, for many countries the tangible effects of the demographic transformation they are undergoing will only be felt critically in decades to come. In the absence of public pressure for action today, political and institutional foresight is needed to develop a long-term perspective for sustainable social and economic development in ageing societies. Leadership at all levels is key to enhancing awareness and enabling a concerted and coordinated response across government and society.[21]

Political leadership is instrumental in creating a shared understanding, ownership, and responsibility for this endeavour across political parties, parliaments, and government. To advance this, addressing population ageing should be fully considered as a cross-cutting responsibility in the strategic and long-term government programmes for sustainable development and followed up by ageing-specific policies. In recent years, a number of UNECE countries have addressed population ageing as a challenge for long-term sustainable development in their national development strategies (e.g. Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Turkey, Spain).

Several intergovernmental leadership initiatives in the region also have raised attention to ageing. In 2020-21, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, used their Trio-Presidency of the Council of the European Union to call for action on ageing. Under Portuguese Presidency in 2021, the Council adopted Conclusions on Mainstreaming Ageing in Public Policies, encouraging the development of strategic frameworks for mainstreaming ageing at the national level.[22]

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[21] UNECE 2021. Political commitment. How to build the case for a Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Ageing? UNECE Toolkit for Mainstreaming Ageing available on unece.org/mainstreaming-ageing.
[22] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6976-2021-INIT/en/pdf, para 26.

Trio Presidency of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia calls for action on ageing

Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia held the presidency of the Council of the European Union during the 18-month period from July 2020 to December 2021. In their joint declaration they called for mainstreaming ageing in all policy fields "to help societies and economies adapt appropriately to demographic change with a view to societies that accommodate the needs and interests of all ages, strengthening social inclusion and solidarity between the generations (...) adopting a life-course approach to ageing to the benefit of all generations and society as a whole".

Through international conferences and Council Conclusions, Germany put the emphasis on human rights of older persons in the era of digitalisation, Portugal on mainstreaming ageing in public policies, and Slovenia on the life-course approach and intergenerational cooperation to combat ageism. National and regional older people's organisations were actively involved in shaping the debate, co-organising two international conferences on ageing held in 2020 and 2021. Under the Trio Presidency the Council of the European Union adopted two Conclusions on "Human Rights, Participation and Well-being of Older Persons in the Era of Digitalisation" (Germany) and "Mainstreaming Ageing in Public Policies" (Portugal). .

Source: Trio Presidency Declaration on Ageing, 2020.

Another example of raising awareness on the importance of a coordinated response to population ageing is the demographic resilience programme of the UNFPA Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia presented below.[23]

Demographic Resilience Programme for Europe and Central Asia - UNFPA

In 2020, the UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia launched a 'Demographic Resilience Programme for Europe and Central Asia'. The programme aims to assist countries in the region with strengthening their capacity to understand and anticipate the population dynamics they are experiencing. It aims to ensure they have the skills, tools, political will and public support to manage them. A *Decade of Demographic Resilience* was launched in December 2021 at a Ministerial Conference on "Shaping Europe's Demographic Future" in Sofia, Bulgaria. During the Decade, a bi-annual Demographic Resilience Forum will take stock of progress, sustain political support, and showcase successful new initiatives to address demographic change. The 'Sofia Alliance' – a member States-led policy and practice community facilitated by UNFPA – contributes to achieving the goals of the Decade by offering interested parties a platform to receive support, and share experiences, in addressing challenges and harnessing opportunities related to demographic change in areas such as population ageing, migration, rural revitalization, empowering young people, gender equality, financing of social policies, and enabling people to have the number of children they want.

Source: UNFPA, 2020.

Strategic frameworks for

Since the adoption of MIPAA/RIS in 2002, most countries in the UNECE region have developed national ageing strategies and action plans that address the needs of older persons and societal adaptations to population ageing across policy sectors. Recent

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