



Demographic ageing and vulnerability in the European Union: a brief analysis of the challenges and opportunities it poses

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ABSTRACT: The pronounced ageing of the European population has multidimensional repercussions at the socio-economic level, which the European Union has been addressing. In this context, concerns about intergenerational solidarity and social sustainability are gaining prominence and constitute the cornerstones of the life-cycle approach embodied in the European Commission's Green Paper on Ageing: Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations, published in 2021. In this article, we aim to address the underlying challenges, as well as the opportunities that these demographic trends present in the European Union today, placing special focus on the aforementioned report. We also highlight important stakeholder inputs on this issue, notably the recommendation to put in place a human-rights based approach regarding the rights of older people in the European Union. It is also our intention to explore the notion of vulnerability associated with the elderly, essentially addressing the extent to which it can be applied uniformly to this group, and to briefly evaluate the concept of vulnerability in light of emerging theories that render it as a universal aspect of human life.

KEYWORDS: Demographic ageing – life-cycle approach – ageism – intergenerational solidarity – vulnerability.

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1. Introduction

Current and future demographic prospects across European societies point to demographic ageing, a trend brought about by advances in healthcare over time, which in turn drive increased life expectancy. According to a 2010 report by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, average life expectancy increased by about 8 years in Europe between 1960 and 2004 and is projected to increase by more than 6 years by 2050, with a similar trend in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ("OECD") countries, leading to an increase in the percentage of the population aged 65 and over.¹

While the world population is steadily increasing and getting proportionally younger, the European Union ("EU") population is ageing rapidly, with an average age of 43.9 in 2020, compared with 38.4 two decades ago,² and the median age in the EU-27 is projected to increase by 4.3 years between 2020 and 2050 to 48.2 years.³ The decreasing number of working-age people and the increasing number of elderly people will determine the evolution of the pattern of the old-age dependency ratio. Official data reveals that, at the EU-27 level, the old-age dependency ratio is projected to increase from 31.4 percent in 2019 to 57.1 percent by 2100.⁴

It should be noted that these prospects also result from the aggregate effects of fertility, mortality and migration trends,⁵ however, "*an increase in fertility to the replacement level of about 2 children per woman from 2020 onwards would not completely prevent the EU working-age population from declining in size.*"⁶ To this extent, the risk of labor shortages increases, making it difficult to sustain production and service provision in the EU, with a major impact on prosperity and welfare.⁷

Social sustainability is compromised by increasingly evident imbalances: an ageing population tends to have more chronic physical and mental health conditions and demand more of health and social services, but if fewer people are working, jobs may go unfilled and there may be less tax revenue to fund public programs such as health care and state pensions.⁸ To offset the ageing trend, the

¹ Stefano Kluzer, Christine Redecker and Clara Centeno, "Long-term care challenges in an ageing society: the role of ICT and migrants – results from a study on England, Germany, Italy and Spain", EUR 24382 EN, JRC58533, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2010, 16. DOI: 10.2791/42723.

² European Parliamentary Research Service, "Demographic Outlook for the European Union – 2022", ISSN 2600-5255, May 2022, 1, accessed June 9, 2022, [Demographic Outlook for the European Union \(europa.eu\)](#).

³ European Parliamentary Research Service, "Demographic Outlook for the European Union – 2022", 2.

⁴ Eurostat, "Population projections in the EU – Age dependency ratios", September 2020, accessed May 27, 2022, [Population projections in the EU - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁵ Wolfgang Lutz, *et al.*, "Demographic Scenarios for the EU", EUR 29739 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Joint Research Centre, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-03216-8 Joint Research Centre, 19, accessed June 8, 2022, [JRC Publications Repository - Demographic Scenarios for the EU \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁶ Wolfgang Lutz, *et al.*, "Demographic Scenarios for the EU", 23.

⁷ European Commission, "Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations", COM (2021) 50, January 27, 2021, 6, accessed May 27, 2022, [1_en_act_part1_v8_0.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#).

⁸ Annabel Walker, "The EU is ageing and in need of care – here's what that means for its economic future – How ageing populations affect the economy", World Economic Forum, October 26, 2021, accessed June 3, 2022, [How will Europe care for its ageing population? | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#).

EU and its Member States are compelled to develop policies in a variety of policy fields to ensure the sustainable development of societies. To this end, one is faced with the key concepts of intergenerational solidarity and social sustainability – the cornerstones of the life-cycle approach embodied in the European Commission’s Green Paper on Ageing: Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations, published in 2021.

As stated in the introductory chapter of the report, “*given the scale, speed and impact this [ageing] trend will have across society, we also need to look at new approaches and ensure that our policies are fit for purpose in an era of major change (...)*”.⁹ Considering this framework, we will seek to examine the underlying problems and the opportunities that these trends present in the EU today, always in the light of the rights of the elderly to lead a life of dignity and independence and to participate in social and cultural life [Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (“CFREU”)].

2. The pressure of European demographic trends on the pension system and care provision

The European Pillar of Social Rights, which aims to build an inclusive and fair Europe, provides in its Chapter III – Social protection and inclusion – that “*workers and the self-employed in retirement have the right to a pension commensurate to their contributions and ensuring an adequate income (...)* [and that] *everyone in old age has the right to resources that ensure living in dignity.*”¹⁰ Indeed, according to the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan there was an extension of social protection to previously uncovered groups by several Member States during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more consideration is needed regarding the financing of social protection, namely models that allow for continued solidarity between and within generations.¹¹

One can read in the Green Paper on Ageing that “*ensuring that pension systems cover different types of economic activity (...) would help safeguard their adequacy and contribution base and mitigate inequalities within the labour market.*”¹² Furthermore, as mentioned in Recital 14 of the Council Recommendation of 8 November 2019 on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed, “*the gaps in access to social protection could put at risk the welfare and health of individuals and contribute to increasing economic uncertainty, the risk of poverty and inequalities (...) lead to suboptimal investment in human capital, reduce trust in institutions and limit inclusive economic growth.*”¹³

Walter and Maltby (2012) state that “*historically, there has been a close association between older people and the development of ‘welfare states’*” and as “*pensions continue to*

⁹ European Commission, “Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations”, 2.

¹⁰ European Commission, “*The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles*”, Chapter III – Social protection and inclusion, accessed June 4, 2022, [The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹¹ European Commission, “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”, Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Report, March 2021, 30, accessed May 25, 2022, [The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹² European Commission, “Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations”, 13.

¹³ Official Journal of the European Union, “Council Recommendation of 8 November 2019 on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed”, 2019/C 387/01, accessed June 3, 2022, [EUR-Lex - 32019H1115\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#).

*constitute the largest items of national social expenditures across Europe (...) this poses sharp policy questions about future sustainability in the face of demographic ageing.*¹⁴ In the same vein, as per the European Commission's Green Paper on Ageing: Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations published in 2021, *"this trend [of ageing societies] has implications for economic growth, fiscal sustainability, health and long-term care, well-being and social cohesion."*¹⁵

The aforementioned document contemplates a set of measures and actions that should be carried out in the EU in order to promote the dignified ageing of elderly people, as well as to strengthen solidarity between generations. Throughout the text, the challenges that the EU faces in this respect are mentioned, considering the increased difficulties that have gripped Europe following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focusing on the issue of meeting the growing needs of an ageing population, the drafters of the Green Paper note that *"[t]he way societies prepare for ageing needs to go beyond economic issues and quality, affordable services. We have to think about how generations live together"*.¹⁶ In addition to the social isolation and loneliness they refer to as issues that have acquired enormous relevance with the pandemic both for younger and older age groups, producing multidimensional impacts on societies, they also point out that current demographic trends suggest the need for investment in long-term care and various types of support for the elderly.

Drawing on Principle 16 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which states *"the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative healthcare of good quality"*, and Principle 18 – *"the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home care and community-based care"*¹⁷ –, the drafters stress the need to invest in long-term care services. Notwithstanding the urgency of investing in more care infrastructure, and covering the most disadvantaged areas, for example rural and hard-to-reach areas, the report mentions the pressure that exists on informal caregivers when referring to the persistent problem of not managing to successfully recruit qualified labour to work in the field – *"this adds pressure on informal carers – usually women – who struggle to balance care and paid work, often with costs for society such as negative effects on health and well-being, reduced participation in the labour market and reduced income."*¹⁸

Demographic changes are the key factor in determining the demand for health and long-term care services,¹⁹ suggests a report by the Joint Research Centre, and in this sense, they are indicative of the need for care, and of what kind, as well as the demand for care workers to cope with the growing pressures in an ageing society.

¹⁴ Alan Walker and Tony Maltby, "Active ageing: A strategic policy solution to demographic ageing in the European Union", *International Journal of Social Welfare*, vol. 21, issue 1 (2012): 118, accessed June 11, 2022, [Active ageing: A strategic policy solution to demographic ageing in the European Union - Walker - 2012 - International Journal of Social Welfare - Wiley Online Library](#).

¹⁵ European Commission, "Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations", 2.

¹⁶ European Commission, "Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations", 15.

¹⁷ European Commission, "Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations", 15.

¹⁸ European Commission, "Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations", 17.

¹⁹ Sara Grubanov-Boskovic, *et al.*, "Healthcare and long-term care workforce: demographic challenges and potential contribution of migration and digital technology", EUR 30593 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, ISBN 978-92-76-30233-9, 2021, 19, accessed May 28, 2022, DOI: [10.2760/33427](#).

As stated in the Green Paper on Ageing, despite improvements in healthy life expectancy, the older you get the greater the likelihood of disease or disability, and progressively many older people become frail and dependent on long-term care.²⁰

Although one of the main goals of the EU is its cohesion, and this also applies to health and long-term care, as well as to support for the informal care providers, there are substantial differences between Member States, and regional asymmetries within each country. This is, for example, the case in Portugal, which has long been characterised by notable regional asymmetries between the coastal and inland areas, the latter being more deprived in terms of access to hospital and home care, with a greater tendency towards social isolation, and a lack of young people to stimulate the growth and recognition of these particular regions, beyond the transient seasons when tourism tends to be more pronounced.

The care sector is under pressure because as people get older, they need additional support in their daily tasks.²¹ Moreover, unpaid care, mostly provided by women, contributes substantially to countries' economies as well as to individual and social well-being. There is a large body of literature on the subject that increasingly recognises the importance of informal caregivers as an integral part of care services and the benefits that their work produces for the society as a whole.

Given the recognition that informal care is “*a cornerstone of all long-term care (LTC) systems in Europe*”²² one of the key commitments of the European Pillar of Social Rights is to invest in health and long-term care, areas that came under considerable strain during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the challenges already in place.²³ The issue of care is of growing relevance, given the crucial role of informal caregivers in sustaining the care economy and promoting dignified ageing of elderly care recipients globally, bearing in mind the current and future demographic outlook in societies.

Considering no relevant changes are made to the present *status quo*, the International Labour Organisation (“ILO”) estimates that in order to meet future demands for jobs in care, health, and social work, and thereby achieve the sustainable development goals, about 117 million jobs would have to be created.²⁴ According to OECD data published in a report in 2019, the lowest rates of daily caregiving are found in Sweden, Greece, Switzerland, Denmark, and the Netherlands – countries in most of which the formal long-term care sector is well developed, and public coverage is comprehensive.

Furthermore, on average across OECD countries, 61% of informal daily caregivers are women, with Greece and Portugal having the highest gender

²⁰ European Commission, “Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations”, 14.

²¹ European Commission, “The Silver Economy – Final Report”, EU Publications, ISBN 978-92-79-76911-5. Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (European Commission), Oxford Economics, Technopolis, 2018, 22, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a9efa929-3ec7-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1>.

²² European Commission, “Informal Care in Europe. Exploring Formalisation, Availability and Quality”, EU Publications, KE-04-18-543-EN-N, 2018, 5, accessed June 5, 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8106&furtherPubs=yes>.

²³ European Commission, “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”, 29.

²⁴ ILO, “How many jobs need to be created globally to meet future care demands?”, accessed June 7, 2022, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/maps-and-charts/enhanced/WCMS_721424/lang-en/index.htm.

imbalance, accounting for over 70% of informal caregivers being women. The report highlights that, among other factors, the increasing participation rates of women in the labour market means that there is a risk that fewer people will be willing and able to provide informal care in the future. As a result, demand for professional long-term care services may increase and in order to keep up with this trend, it is essential that these services are adequately resourced, allowing for their sustainability and accessibility.²⁵

Valuing and supporting informal care have an impact on the way care is provided and on the respect for the rights and dignity of the people who make up these care dyads, namely the elderly care recipients. The elderly receive help from their family or other informal caregivers, as well as from formal professional care services. Where seniors struggling with daily living activities do not have access to, or cannot afford, formal care, and where their families and friends are unable or unwilling to support them, long-term care needs will go unmet.²⁶

It is especially noteworthy that informal care, combined with effective support, has a preventive aspect in that it avoids or delays hospital admission and long-term residential care by preparing for quicker and more efficient “discharges” from hospitals. Against the backdrop of care workforce shortages, validating the skills of informal caregivers, based on national and international competence validation models, can be a crucial step towards professional qualification in the care sector, contributing: *i*) to opening up new employment opportunities; and *ii*) maintaining the sustainability of care provision in the long term.²⁷

3. Reflecting on the opportunities provided by the Silver Economy

According to the Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing, published in 24 October 2019, “*taking wellbeing into account in all policies is vitally important to the Union’s economic growth, productivity, long-term fiscal sustainability and societal stability*” (Recital 1), and in addition to other acknowledgments made in this publication, emphasis is given to the fact that “*longevity provides possibilities for the labour market and the economy, and requires supportive measures enabling all people to make an active contribution to society and working life*” (Recital 12).²⁸

Notwithstanding the challenges presented by the ageing demographic trends, which the Green Paper on Ageing addresses, this report also considers the opportunities that can be seized in this context by referring to the Silver Economy. According to Okumura et al. (2020) the Silver Economy is the subset of the global economy associated with the demographic shift brought about by population

²⁵ OECD, *Health at a Glance 2019, Ageing and Long-term Care – Informal Carers*. OECD Indicators. (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 232, accessed May 24, 2022, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/4dd50c09-en>.

²⁶ OECD, “Affordability of long-term care services among older people in the OECD and the EU”, Social Protection for Long-term care in old age, May 2020, 1, accessed June 12, 2022, [Affordability of long-term care services among older people in the OECD and the EU](#).

²⁷ Eurocarers, “Enhancing the Rights of Informal Carers – Eurocarers’ Response to the Consultation on the Social Pillar Action Plan”, Eurocarers’ Publications, 2020, 8, accessed June 4, 2022, [Enhancing the Rights of Informal Carers – Eurocarers’ Response to the Consultation on the Social Pillar Action Plan – Eurocarers](#).

²⁸ Official Journal of the European Union, “Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing”, 2019/C 400/09, 26 November 2019, accessed June 5, 2022, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1126\(06\)&rid=5](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1126(06)&rid=5).

ageing and it focuses on the needs and demands of older people,²⁹ to which we must pay close attention in order to explore future trends and create opportunities for the production and creation of services aimed at the senior population. As a matter of fact, population projections suggest the Silver Economy will expand steadily over the next 10 years across the EU and it holds the potential to expand by approximately 5% per year up to 2025, to 5.7 trillion euros.³⁰

A study was conducted for the European Commission in 2018 – entitled, “The Silver Economy” – so as to provide a framework for the development of a Silver Economy Strategy for Europe. In this report, we are faced with vital information about the contribution of the Silver Economy to overall European economic activity. The document highlights the fact that in 2015, 39% of the population in the EU was made up of individuals aged 50 years or older. In total, these individuals consumed 3.7 trillion euros of goods and services, and the Silver Economy supported more than 4.2 trillion euros in GDP and over 78 million jobs, in that same time period.³¹

In addition to other conclusions presented, chapter five of this report – Cases for growing the Silver Economy – contains a set of ideas to be considered in future policies, in order to invest in the economy targeted at older people and to achieve a favorable payoff in terms of economic and social growth in the European sphere. Among the suggestions presented, we highlight the recommendation to invest in health in close connection to technological developments. As highlighted in the report, the lack of interoperability of the healthcare system hinders the prevention and treatment of diseases, and electronic and mobile health solutions could help improve the quality of care for elderly and chronically ill people, for example, through the development of integrated and personalised health and care for older people.³²

Furthermore, as is often recognised and reported, older people are more fragile and tend to be more susceptible to social exclusion, isolation and the feeling of loneliness. In this context, robotics could enjoy a wide margin of success by investing in the development of services aimed at mitigating this phenomenon – robots can provide companionship, assist with simple tasks, call emergency services when necessary, help with physical therapy exercises, and medication compliance.³³ The market potential for the development of smart home solutions is also considered to be wide, as home adaptations have been shown to improve the quality of life for many of the people who benefit from them.³⁴

In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the political opportunities that can be seized in times of crisis to get us out of it. It should be stressed that

²⁹ Masato Okumura, *et al.*, “The silver economy in Latin America and the Caribbean: aging as an opportunity for innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusion”, IDB Group, August 2020, 5, accessed June 2, 2022, [The Silver Economy in Latin America and the Caribbean: Aging as an Opportunity for Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Inclusion | Publications \(iadb.org\)](#).

³⁰ European Commission, “Silver Economy Study: How to stimulate the economy by hundreds of millions of Euros per year”, Report/Study, May 3, 2018, accessed May 25, 2022, [Silver Economy Study: How to stimulate the economy by hundreds of millions of Euros per year | Shaping Europe’s digital future \(europa.eu\)](#).

³¹ European Commission, “The Silver Economy – Final Report”, 8.

³² European Commission, “The Silver Economy – Final Report”, 32.

³³ European Commission, “The Silver Economy – Final Report”, 33.

³⁴ European Commission, “The Silver Economy – Final Report”, 36.

opportunities in this context need sturdy framing and operability and putting them at the center of policy agendas goes a long way toward contributing to social and intergenerational sustainability.

5. Fostering a human-rights based approach to ageing

Given the scope of the topic in question, we consider it relevant to address the more comprehensive United Nations (“UN”) framework for ageing embodied in the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030. It consists of a global collaboration, aligned with the last ten years of the Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”), which aims at improving the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live. In the pursuit of healthy ageing, fundamental changes will be needed not only in the actions we take but also in the way we think about age and ageing – that is the World Health Organization (“WHO”)’s take on the matter.³⁵

In addition to other tenets on which it is based, we highlight the emphasis the Plan of Action on the Decade on Healthy Ageing places on the understanding that this ten-year initiative is based on the human rights approach, which addresses the universality, inalienability, and indivisibility of human rights to which everyone is entitled without distinction of any kind including the rights to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.³⁶

According to the UN Sustainable Development Group (“UNSDG”), a human rights-based approach (“HRBA”) is a “*conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards (...) [which] seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress and often result in groups of people being left behind.*”³⁷

With this brief background of UN action in this regard in mind, it is noteworthy to focus on the Contribution to the Public consultation on the Green Paper on Ageing by ILO, International Organisation for Migration (“IOM”), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (“OHCHR”), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (“UNHCR”), UN Women and WHO which was made public on April 21, 2021. In this statement, one is faced with the acknowledgment of EU’s role in pursuing the goals of dignified ageing and intergenerational solidarity, however, there are a couple of critical points that are highlighted, as well as remarks on how to improve the strategies currently underway in the EU.

It is apparent that emphasis is placed on a human rights-based approach to ageing. Indeed, the bottom line is clear – the debate on ageing and the initiatives related to the Green Paper ought to place the human rights of older people at the center, and to that extent, the starting point should be the rights of older people, rather than their needs.³⁸ For example, regarding the topic *Lifelong learning across the*

³⁵ WHO, “UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030”, Home/Initiatives/Ageing/UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, accessed June 8, 2022, [UN Decade of Healthy Ageing \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/initiatives/2021-2030).

³⁶ WHO, “Decade of Healthy Ageing: Plan of Action”, 14 December 2020, 5, accessed June 3, 2022, [Decade of Healthy Ageing: Plan of Action \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/initiatives/2021-2030).

³⁷ UNSDG, “Human Rights-Based Approach”, accessed June 2, 2022, [UNSDG | Human Rights-Based Approach](https://www.unsdg.org/human-rights-based-approach).

³⁸ United Nations Brussels, “Contribution to public consultation on the Green Paper on Ageing by ILO, IOM, OHCHR, UNHCR, UN Women and WHO”, 21 April 2021, 1, accessed May 24, 2022,

life-cycle, this paper suggests that older people encounter barriers in the exercise of the fundamental right to lifelong learning, and it would be in the EU's interest to promote further action aimed at the specific training of older workers, therefore mitigating the difficulties they face with regard to the use of new technology. In this context, it would be advisable, according to the report, to promote working in intergenerational teams, fostering the exchange of knowledge, and also tackling stereotypes.³⁹

It should also be pointed out that this statement recognises older people are particularly vulnerable and that one key threat to autonomy is elder abuse, currently affecting 15.7% of older people living in the community and an even higher proportion living in institutions, especially women, a phenomenon which requires more mechanisms to protect the rights of older people and to ensure access to justice.⁴⁰

These recommendations are ultimately concerned with combating ageism, which, according to WHO, refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age and can change how we view ourselves, can erode solidarity between generations, can devalue or limit our ability to benefit from what younger and older populations can contribute, and can impact our health, longevity, and well-being.⁴¹

In the year 2020, the AGE Platform published a brief online article addressing the report issued by the EU – Age discrimination law outside the employment field – and began by pointing out that this report provides a further argument about the need to strengthen protection against age discrimination outside the field of employment.⁴² According to the Platform, the report shows that in general, the Member States are in agreement on key concepts of equality law and how they apply to age discrimination, and that the areas of most concern include the issues of victimisation, multiple discrimination, exceptions for the financial services sector and the lack of case law in the field of education.⁴³

More recently, on May 13, 2022, the same Platform published another article on the lack of involvement of Member States in the adoption of a UN convention on the human rights of older people. In its official contribution to the discussion on this issue, feeding into the 12th session of the Open-ended Working Group for the purpose of strengthening the protection of the human rights of older persons⁴⁴ that took place in April 2022, AGE stressed, among other points, that current European legislation is not sufficient for the protection of older people's right to work on an equal footing with others. When it comes to the growing concern of

Microsoft Word - UNBT submission Green Paper Ageing FINAL (ohchr.org).

³⁹ United Nations Brussels, "Contribution to public consultation on the Green Paper on Ageing by ILO, IOM, OHCHR, UNHCR, UN Women and WHO", 4.

⁴⁰ United Nations Brussels, "Contribution to public consultation on the Green Paper on Ageing by ILO, IOM, OHCHR, UNHCR, UN Women and WHO", 12.

⁴¹ WHO, "Ageing: Ageism", 18 March 2021, accessed June 12, 2022, [Ageing: Ageism \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageism).

⁴² AGE Platform Europe, "New EU report shows lack of protection from age discrimination beyond employment", 9 December 2020, accessed May 28, 2022, [New EU report shows lack of protection from age discrimination beyond employment | AGE Platform \(age-platform.eu\)](https://age-platform.eu/new-eu-report-shows-lack-of-protection-from-age-discrimination-beyond-employment).

⁴³ AGE Platform Europe, "New EU report shows lack of protection from age discrimination beyond employment".

⁴⁴ UN, "Open-ended Working Group on Ageing for the purpose of strengthening the protection of the human rights of older persons", accessed June 3, 2022, [Twelfth Session of the United Nations Open-ended Working Group on strengthening the protection of the human rights of older persons.](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/ageing/open-ended-working-group-on-ageing)

economic insecurity in old age, AGE stated that for this to be successfully addressed, a multi-sector life course approach must be used to equip people throughout their lives with the tools to support themselves in later life. To that extent, investment in education, health, both in childhood and adulthood, are long-term measures that involve everyone and contribute to greater economic security for people in older age.⁴⁵

Thus, the organisation in question highlighted that older people have the right to decide when to withdraw from the labour force and emphasis was placed on the need for robust social protection systems that provide income security during career breaks or reduced working time for education and unpaid work such as care work.⁴⁶ Another issue worthy of attention was raised, with regard to access to justice, in that people over 55 are less likely to be familiar with the CFREU, and in that sense, they are less well-versed in it and do not correctly identify the situations in which the CFREU applies compared to younger age groups.⁴⁷

The Contribution to the Public consultation on the Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations called on the Commission to elaborate a comprehensive White Paper with concrete policy options, including an Equality Strategy for the rights of older persons, as this would clearly support building a “Union of Equality” which is one of the major priorities of the President of the Commission.⁴⁸

5. How vulnerable?

Throughout this article, we have been referring to the elderly as a vulnerable group – we have stated the ways in which this materializes in social and economic terms and the ways in which the EU has responded to the exponential growth of the elderly population, as well as the underlying fragility that characterizes this demographic group across the board. On the one hand, there is a focus on the challenges that a large proportion of older population brings to society; on the other hand, as the Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing emphasizes, there are opportunities that can be seized at the level of the labor market and the economy in this context, which we have already outlined.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the concept of active ageing, some authors point out that the interpretation of this concept in an exclusively economic framework is especially prevalent.⁴⁹ While this provides a relevant part of active ageing, it is not the only aspect to be considered. The stereotypes reflected in this derive from “*deeply entrenched value patterns in Western society characterized by a strong performance orientation that celebrates economic productivity and independence.*”⁵⁰ In fact, the concept of active ageing

⁴⁵ AGE Platform Europe, “Older people’s rights – our contribution to the upcoming UN discussions”, 11 March 2022, accessed June 2, 2022, [Older people’s rights - our contribution to the upcoming UN discussions | AGE Platform \(age-platform.eu\)](https://ageplatform.eu/older-peoples-rights-our-contribution-to-the-upcoming-un-discussions).

⁴⁶ AGE Platform Europe, “Older people’s rights – our contribution to the upcoming UN discussions”.

⁴⁷ AGE Platform Europe, “Older people’s rights – our contribution to the upcoming UN discussions”.

⁴⁸ UN, “Contribution to the public consultation on the EU Green Paper on Ageing – Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations”, 21 April 2021, 2, accessed June 4, 2022, [Microsoft Word - Annex-Joint contribution to consultation on Green Paper on Ageing-21 04 2021.docx \(ohchr.org\)](https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Annex-Joint-contribution-to-consultation-on-Green-Paper-on-Ageing-21-04-2021.docx).

⁴⁹ Kim Boudiny, “‘Active ageing’: from empty rhetoric to effective policy tool”, *Ageing & Society*, 33(6) (2013): 1097.

⁵⁰ Jocelyn Angus and Patricia Reeve, “Ageism: a threat to «aging well» in the 21st century”, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 25(2) (2006): 138. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464805285745>.

has been the subject of discussion, and some authors point out that its meaning is not properly grasped without understanding that it is in fact designed “to change our views, perspectives, understandings, stereotypes and prejudices about ageing in order to reconstruct the practical societal reality of the ageing process in an ‘ageing society’.”⁵¹

The paradigm of successful ageing, which is defined by Rowe and Khan as a state including three main components – high cognitive and physical function capacity, active engagement with life, and lower risk of getting sick and/or disabled⁵² – is described by Heather Dillaway and Mary Byrnes as one that tends to be generally perceived as “*success as an outcome, rather than a process*”. The latter is actually much broader, and involves understanding the development of new roles, viewpoints, and many interrelated social contexts.⁵³

As Austin puts it, “*the goal of ageing well has real and conceptual ambiguities that must be addressed*”.⁵⁴ Indeed, ageing cannot be shunned or avoided, it is a phase of life that encompasses different dynamics and traits than those that define other demographic groups. Nonetheless, the debate on ideas regarding active and successful ageing through new multidimensional perspectives, which also address power structures and social economic contexts that profile the elderly as a heterogeneous group, should be highlighted.

In fact, the age range of the elderly is composed of subdivisions that require attention, as the frailty to which they are subjected varies and influences their ability to age healthily and remain active in society. As Narushima et al. point out, vulnerability in adulthood is greatly influenced by the socio-demographic characteristics of individuals, living and health conditions, the availability of resources, and their ability to utilize these resources.⁵⁵ This, in turn, leads to very different outcomes in seniors’ ability to allocate resources and live as healthy and active lives as possible.

Hence, several authors highlight how the experience of old age cannot be reduced to a false generalization. Thornton demonstrates how over-generalist categorization of older people leads to policymaking that is also possibly too generic: “[c]onstruced categories and straw man statements provide points of view that serve as the basis for discussion, research, and analysis. For example, the dependency ratio used in economic analyses is based on fixed categories applied to those aged 15 or younger and those aged 65 or older. Subsequently, these two categories of dependency drive social policy and planning, as the discussions of population aging illustrate. Adults 65 and older are dependent in these created categories and equations only because social and economic analysis “labels” them as such, regardless of their economic or social productivity or circumstances”.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Paul Stenner, Tara McFarquhar and Ann Bowling, “Older people and ‘active ageing’: subjective aspects of ageing actively”, *J. Health Psychology*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2011): 468, accessed October 7, 2022, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21224334/>.

⁵² John Rowe and Robert Kahn, “Successful Aging”, *The Gerontologist*, vol. 37, issue 4 (1997): 433. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/37.4.433>.

⁵³ Heather Dillaway and Mary Byrnes, “Reconsidering successful aging a call for renewed and expanded academic critiques and conceptualizations”, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, vol. 28, no. 6 (2009): 706. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464809333882>.

⁵⁴ Carol Austin, “Aging Well: what are the odds?”, *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1991): 73, accessed October 6, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44876961>.

⁵⁵ Miya Narushima, Jian Liu and Naomi Diestelkamp, “Lifelong learning in active ageing discourse: its conserving effect on wellbeing, health and vulnerability”, *Ageing & Society*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2018): 655. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16001136>.

⁵⁶ James E. Thornton, “Myths of aging or ageist stereotypes”, *Educational Gerontology*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2002): 308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/036012702753590415>.

There is a criticism that one has to put forward regarding the way in which healthy and successful ageing is promoted, when the framework is limited to a one size fits all view and does not consider the effects of gender, class, and race.⁵⁷ The ageing process is also, to a large extent, influenced by socio-economic conditions throughout life, the kind of work people performed, and what kind of skills it required from them, the resources they had access to, etc. Simultaneously, personal history intersects with other societal factors already mentioned (social class, gender, race) that impact in a more or less favorable way this whole process. We will not go into detail on this subject, but we still consider it vital to touch on this overarching insight.

In this context of discussion, it is worth highlighting how vulnerability is not a watertight construct – in effect, it manifests itself in different degrees in the elderly group and, to a significant extent, is related to the multidimensional aspects that characterize their life trajectory, from birth to the current moment of their existence.

At a time when the EU, confronted with a moment of heightened vulnerability – heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic – is highlighting the need to develop a sustainable *Union of Equality*, marked by intergenerational solidarity, it is important to look at the ways in which vulnerability can be conceptualized and embodied in holistic and robust social policies that render it as a defining characteristic of the life of every human being. Vulnerability has often been defined as a negative state – and in the same vein, the individualist model of autonomy views human vulnerability and dependency as evidence of an inability to achieve or maintain autonomous agency, rather than as conditions of agency and autonomy among humans.⁵⁸ However, this narrow view has been challenged – according to the perspective pioneered by Martha Fineman, vulnerability is a universal condition, inherent to the human condition itself. In turn, this implies understanding that the meaning, universality, and constancy of vulnerability requires that politics, ethics, and law be shaped around a full and comprehensive view of human experience in order to meet the needs of real-life subjects.⁵⁹

We consider that this emerging literature has the potential to have an important impact on how we look at and evaluate the process of ageing – which is not homogeneous and needs to be evaluated in a variable spectrum – and the possibilities that can be harnessed from a perspective that goes beyond productivity, looking at other social variables at play that contribute to a healthy later life. Moreover, it can shape how we build a more equal European society as well, allowing us to inform public policy and to allocate resources to improve quality of life across the entire lifespan of European citizens.

⁵⁷ Martha Holstein and Meredith Minkler, “Self, society, and the «new gerontology»”, *The Gerontologist*, vol. 43, no. 6 (2003): 790. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/43.6.787>.

⁵⁸ See Susan Dodds, “Depending on care: recognition of vulnerability and the social contribution of care provision”, *Bioethics*, vol. 21, no. 9 (2007): 501. ISSN 0269-9702 (print); 1467-8519 (online).

⁵⁹ Martha Fineman, “The vulnerable subject: anchoring equality in the human condition”, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* (2008): 10.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to highlight the growing concerns regarding the phenomenon of ageing in the EU, but also the political opportunities that have opened up with this crisis, further exposed with the COVID-19 pandemic that has ravaged the entire world. As we have already pointed out, social and intergenerational sustainability is compromised by increasingly evident imbalances, namely the fact that we are facing a large elderly population, which tends to be more fragile and, in this sense, health and pension systems are under increasing pressure to meet their demands.

It was also shown that informal care work deserves more recognition and a more robust legal framework, as it is one of the main pillars of assistance to an ageing population reliant on additional support and provides a preventive aspect by avoiding *ad aeternum* stays in hospitals. In addition to the challenges that the Green Paper on Ageing highlights in this regard, it also mentions the opportunities for growth in both economic and social grounds through investment in the Silver Economy. Among other suggestions, of particular relevance are those that are in line with the digital transition underway in Europe, primarily related to investment in technologies to improve health services and reduce the exclusion and isolation to which elderly people are often exposed. Notwithstanding, it is especially important to look at the recommendations of other stakeholders, whose input is critical for the formulation of more robust future policies aimed at European social cohesion and the creation of Union of Equality. In this regard, the EU has received feedback that the focus should shift from the needs of older people to their rights, and thus build a human rights-based approach that actively combats ageism not only in the workplace but in all areas of life in society.

It is quite evident that, through its publications and recommendations, the EU has demonstrated its desire to maintain an active role in tackling the multidimensional challenges posed by ageing and has been addressing the issue considering the impacts it brings to various sectors of our society. This requires a holistic approach, which both addresses measures in different age groups and their inter-connectedness, and also demands shifting mentalities and the breaking down of stereotypes. This is the kind of matter where actions take time to materialise, hence efforts have to be maintained and improved to begin to see progress in upholding intergenerational solidarity and social sustainability. As such, focus should also be placed on organisations' insights into new courses of action to address, discuss, and formulate the ageing phenomenon, namely, those that place the person at the center of the discussion.

On a final note, we highlight the importance of the contributions of sociology, philosophy, and the specific branch of gerontology in understanding the phenomenon of ageing, and, also, in grasping the broader concept of vulnerability, the ways in which it manifests as well as the rationale for a variable spectrum of this aspect of human life, albeit constant, because it is a universal experience. At the core of this understanding, one recognizes we all live in a state of interdependence – our own autonomy depends on the relationships we have with the resources available to us, with the ties we create, with the context in which we live, learn, work and, ultimately, build our identity.