

Eurolink Age: an example of European lobbying

Christine Marking.
Director Eurolink Age.

Eurolink Age/what does it do?

Formed in 1981, Eurolink Age is a not-for-profit network of organisations and individuals that promotes good policy and practice on ageing in the interests of older people in the European Union. We have members in all member states and we aim to represent all areas of ageing policy and older people's interests: older people's organisations, social welfare organisations, gerontologists, policy-makers etc.

Activities can be summarised under four "i"s:

- Influencing
- Information
- Innovation
- Intergroup

One of our main activities is *influencing* policy. We aim to influence EU policies so that they adequately reflect the interests of all older people. In this respect we would like the EU to both develop specific policies, aimed at older people as well as to incorporate the notion of ageing and older people into all other EU policy making. Influencing is obviously related to policy development: to this effect we organise seminars in order to develop concrete policy recommendations. Also, we formulate position papers on relevant EU documents, outlining specific policy views and recommendations.

In order to influence properly you need information. So we collect and provide *information* on relevant EU developments affecting older people, both for our own means and for others (mainly for members). Information is disseminated mainly by means of our Bulletin.

Our *innovative* activities consist of running two networks of grass roots projects:

ActiVAge - a network that promotes the positive resource of older people and
Ageing Well - a network that promotes healthy ageing.

Providing the secretariat for the European Parliament *Intergroup* on Ageing is another very important activity. The Intergroup was founded in 1984 and is now supported by over 100 Members of Parliament. Its members are from all different parties in the European Parliament.

Aims of the Intergroup:

- provide a forum for discussion and concerted action by MEPs with specific interests in EU issues relevant to older people (e.g. carers for older people age discrimination at work, older people's health)
- to provide regular opportunities for MEPs to exchange views on EU policy affecting older people with representatives of other institutions, e.g. European Commission, Council of Ministers or with other European NGOs and other relevant bodies
- promote the interests of older citizens of the EU in EU programmes and policies

The IGA meets 4-5 times a year during plenary sessions in Strasbourg and are always attended by European Commission officials of the older people's unit of DG V.

We try and build links with other organisations, not only in the field of older people, but organisations active in the general area of social policy: disability, women's rights, migrants, unemployed, poverty...

What do we want from EU policy?

Two things

- **Specific** initiatives for older people
 - * First Action Programme - exchange of info
 - * Seniors' Pass (pilot study is being carried out and results are evaluated by ACE)
- European Year of Older People (1993)

But even more important:

- **mainstreaming** older people should be taken into account in all policies and initiatives as a matter of course!

Background

Society is ageing. Europe is the 'oldest' continent in the world. The importance of the ageing of society is becoming more and more recognised. The causes of this demographic phenomenon are well-known: on the one hand life expectancy has risen because of better living conditions, improved medical care and scientific developments. On the other, birth rates have dropped significantly. A few statistics to illustrate the current situation:

- 20 % of the current population is over 60 of age, 30 % over 50
This percentage is increasing: by 2010 25 % will be over 60, with the number of people over 80 rising even stronger.
- The ratio of workers/pensioners is 5 to 1 at this moment. By 2040 this will be 1 to 3.
This dependency ratio is very important in view of maintaining of the current levels of social protection such as pensions.

The above figures clearly demonstrate that this ageing process brings along several major challenges, such as the following:

- The ageing labour market

Europe is going to need its older workers. Where there was a general tendency to shorten people's working lives, there is now a discussion in many countries to take measures to introduce flexible retirement, to enhance the possibilities for part-time work and to create possibilities for and access to education, i.e. measures which enable people to work longer.

- Financing social security

A large part of the financing of social security depends on the active part of the population. Since the dependency ratio is changing other means will have to be found. In this context, the notion of solidarity between the generations is often mentioned.

- Caring for older people in need of care

The number of older people in need of care - the very old - is increasing. Financing and arranging care for this growing number of people needs to be reviewed. It is this negative image which is often being evoked by the term D - bomb the demographic bomb.

However, this image does need a little reflection. It is too simplistic, too negative. It is true that people are in general living longer, but it is also true that the vast majority of older people is healthy, independent and active and contribute to society in many ways. Medical and technological developments add to this - so one has to be careful with projections and prejudices.

Today's older people are on the whole better educated than previous generations and they wish to and are playing a more active role in society. The time after retirement is no longer viewed as a passive time of rest, but much more as a time that offers possibilities for self-development and activities. Furthermore, older people do contribute a great deal to society: How about the role of the grandparents, taking care of grandchildren, enabling parents to go to work? Or the vast numbers of older volunteers, active in a wide range of activities? Or, a very important example: older people taking care of their very old relatives (an interesting statistic: 75 % of the so-called informal carers belong to the group of over 55s themselves)?

And, last but not least, the fact that people are growing older and live active, healthy lives, is a major accomplishment, it is something positive!

To conclude:

The number of current relevant policy initiatives make it indispensable for older people and their organisations to act the recently adopted Social Policy Agenda, the exclusion programme,. The anti-discrimination package, the employment guidelines...The voice of older people needs to be heard but hopefully in a more united way in the future, when AGE - Europe's Older People's Platform will become a reality.