

## **Seniors and a commitment to volunteering An active social life as a source of health**

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Today's discussions come within the scope of Key Action 6 of the European Commission's Research Directorate General: "The ageing population and disability : **Quality of life and Management of Living Resources**".

Major illnesses are the subject of detailed research, which is as important as it is necessary.

However, most of the difficulties that gradually lead the elderly into a state of dependence result from the pitfalls of everyday life.

These deficiencies, which seem minor, such as the gradual loss of sight, hearing and mobility have until now not really been given much attention by our political leaders.

While there is a lot of discussion about enabling older people to continue living at home, in fact, we are not really dealing with the living situation of such persons, and the means devoted to making their lives easier are anything but generous. Ignorance of this daily reality is obviously the cause.

The possibility of continuing to live in one's own home can also be dependent upon having adequate housing, either new or adapted, and sometimes appropriate assistance.

The social ties of the elderly can also disappear, as close friends pass away and family members or others providing social support move away, and in times of need, they cannot offer assistance. Such events imperceptibly lead to isolation that can have serious consequences.

These observations give us a great deal to think about and are what prompted this forum.

An active life after retirement age not only makes it possible to stay in good health through physical or intellectual activity that is useful to society but also to help the weakest or most dependent persons maintain social contacts that enable them to emerge from a solitude that presents the danger of leading irreversibly into a greater state of dependence.

**Voluntary work** can meet both of these needs. On one condition, however, that it is **recognised for its fair value, appreciated and evaluated**.

The chance of living a longer life is beyond measure. But it requires changes in society, which will be confronted with a large number of people no longer working but whose experience cannot be ignored in their social activities.

It is equally important to limit the impact of the cases of dependence that do occur, to prevent and slow their progression as far as possible.

The organisation of a one-day conference is a limited contribution, of course, but given the participation of those in the field, who are committed, effective and determined, it does represent another avenue of reflection added to the study being conducted by the **Research DG** and particularly its "**Quality of Life**" Directorate.

Our primary goal is to create awareness capable of helping **researchers** prove that an active social life can be one of the keys to a harmonious life respecting human dignity.

Another goal is to create awareness among political leaders of the value of voluntary work and the necessity of **promoting research** on its diversity, quality, effectiveness and on the number of persons involved in such work at all levels. When it meets real needs, voluntary work often **creates jobs**. This aspect is worth particular attention.

We were lucky enough to be given the support of speakers who work in the field in a number of remarkable actions. We would like to thank them for their commitment. Thank you as well to all the participants sharing this day with us.

We would not have succeeded in organising this event, however, without the support from the very beginning of Messrs Kind and Mezelas and their colleagues from the European Commission's **Research DG, "Quality of Life" Directorate**. They believed in the importance of our "fieldwork" contribution as support for the research to be undertaken and we thank them warmly.

It is also thanks to the close co-operation between the European Senior Union (ESU) and Aînés-Solidarité-Europe (A.S.E) that this event was able to get off the ground. Thank you to their Presidents, Stephan Knafl and Cécile Goor, their Treasurers, Walter Paul and Jacques Dubois, and a very special thank you to ESCU General Secretary, Wilhelm Mohaupt.

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