



Media Statement

(International Day of Older People, Thursday 1st October 2009)

"Pensions are the key to human rights for poor older persons and their families", says UN Expert on Extreme Poverty

GENEVA - "Governments should put in place old age social pensions and strengthen their social protection systems to realize the rights of older persons and their families," said the United Nations Independent Expert on human rights and extreme poverty, Magdalena Sepúlveda, on the International Day of Older People.

"It is high time to kill the myth of pensions being unaffordable for poor countries," said Sepúlveda, highlighting that non-contributory pensions, also known as 'social pensions,' are the simplest way to keep older persons out of poverty and to realize their right to social security.

"We only need to look at the achievements in any of the 46 middle and low-income countries that have social pensions," stressed the UN Human Rights Council Expert. "Social pensions not only improve the living conditions of older persons, but also that of their families. So they benefit society as a whole."

On average, four other persons benefit from a social pension, which in turn contributes to the economic development of poor communities. For example, children living with pensioners tend to be better nourished and attend school more often than those living with older relatives where no pension scheme exists. "Consequently," argues Ms. Sepúlveda, "social pensions should be a high priority for States committed to fighting poverty and to ensuring human rights for both old and young."

Population ageing is a global trend, with the number of older people growing fast. Today, over 470 million older people live in developing countries. Among them, 100 million live with less than one dollar per day. By 2050, there will likely be 2 billion people over 60 years old, the vast majority in developing countries.

Older persons can and do make an enormous contribution to society, as reliable care-givers, volunteers and, increasingly, as fully active members of society. Yet, ensuring their well-being and supporting their continuing participation is a challenge.

They can also be particularly vulnerable to human rights violations ranging from straightforward abuse to stereotypes that lead to denial of adequate health care and access to development programmes.

Older people are at greater risk of sudden deterioration in their standard of living; as their health declines and family support structures break down due to several factors such as HIV/AIDS and economic decline. The situation of older women is even worse, as they benefit less from contributory pensions. Older people in many poor countries are frequently unable to meet even basic food needs. This is no doubt an unacceptable situation.

"Most States have been neglecting for years their obligations under the right to social security, for example by not ensuring that poor people who worked in the informal economy all their lives can count on a basic, non contributory, pension," concluded the Independent Expert. "Older people deserve more."

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Magdalena Sepúlveda is the Independent Expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty since May 2008. She is a Chilean lawyer currently working as Research Director at the International Council on Human Rights Policy in Geneva.

For further information on the Independent Expert mandate and work, please visit:
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/poverty/expert/index.htm>

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