

Perspective Article

Active Ageing

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Abstract

On July 13th 2010, Lazlo Andor (Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) declared that active ageing could make the baby-boomers generation a part of the solution of the demographic problem, instead of identifying with it. This is the reason why the “Europe 2020” strategy draws the attention to the necessity of ensuring that the elderly will remain healthy and active for as long as possible. The purpose of this article is to define the exact concept of “active ageing”, its content, as well as some beneficial tips by applying innovative programs in order to promote it in the European Union. Reading the published papers the impression is that despite the increasing number of the elderly in Europe, the potential of an active life while ageing can be beneficial in many ways for the society. It is required that the local and regional authorities create the appropriate conditions for participation, while making thoughtful use of the European funding programs.

Keywords: Active ageing, Elderly, European Programs

Introduction

The idea of active ageing came up as an effort of an alternative approach that recognizes the connection between the principles of politics (occupation, pensions, retirement, health, citizenship) and attempts to unite them in the general context of active ageing¹. The process is so intriguing that Europe devoted the year 2012 to its promotion, and its goals are still active². On October 2006, the European Commission published a declaration, titled as ‘The demographic future of Europe - from challenge to opportunity’. One of the five steps that are suggested includes the concept of active ageing and prolongation of working life in order to increase productivity and to reduce the health care cost³. World Health Organization (WHO) published a document on 2002, named “Active ageing”, which provides a context for the governments and clarifies that politics and programs should be based on the rights, needs, preferences and abilities of the elderly, following a lifelong approach that recognizes the huge impact of life style in the ageing process⁴.

This article aims to define the exact concept of “active ageing”, its content, as well as some beneficial tips by applying innovative programs in order to promote it in European Union countries.

Discussion

Based on the principles of the United Nations for the elderly, including independence, participation, dignity, care,

and fulfillment of personal expectations and ambitions, WHO defined “active ageing” as “the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age”⁴.

The term “active ageing” is preferable to “healthy ageing”, because it radiates a most meaningful content: The word “active” refers to continuous participation in the social, financial, political, spiritual and cultural life, and not only to the ability to work and being physically active. The elderly that are unable to work and those living with sickness or disabilities can remain active, while contributing to their families, counterparts, communities, nations.

Active ageing leads to a “society for every age”, flexible social roles not depending on age, and representation of the elderly as active contributors and entitled to development. According to WHO “Health for all in the 21st century”, the

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concept of active ageing emphasizes equality, solidarity and social justice, recognizing the strong significance of the gender when defining the strategies for development in Health⁵.

WHO's policy context addresses six major factors about active ageing: financial, behavioral, personal, social, health and social services, as well as natural environment⁴.

Four basic components have to be addressed by health politics: a) Preventing and reducing the cost of further disability, chronic diseases and premature mortality, b) Reducing risk factors related to serious illness and increasing the health protecting factors during life span, c) Developing a series of easily accessible, high quality and elderly-friendly health and social services, that address to the needs and rights of ageing individuals, d) Educating and training of caretakers.

According to the European Committee during the Second World Assembly on Ageing, active ageing includes an orientation towards politics and practices in that context. In the core of these politics, lifelong education, prolongation of working life, late and gradual retirement, as well as active lifestyle after retirement and involvement in health maintaining activities, are of crucial importance.

These politics target on the improvement of quality of life, and at the same time, at a social level, contribute to a significant cost saving approach in pension and health system. Therefore, they represent a "win-win" condition for people of all age⁶.

Thus, the strategic planning is being focused on an approach "based on rights", rather than "based on needs" (which indicates that the elderly are a passive target). This approach recognizes every human's rights, equality of opportunity and treatment in every aspect of life while ageing. It supports their own responsibility to actively participate in politics and other aspects of social life⁴.

Society is obliged to provide opportunities to the elderly, to keep working in order to pass on their experience to the young), to actively participate in society, and to live as healthy and active as possible, enjoying a better quality of life⁷.

In the core of WHO's model, lies the lifelong approach (way of life). The cornerstone of active ageing is lifelong education, as during the late years of professional life it ensures the constant development of skill, improves social functioning and well being after retirement and provides the potential of active participation in society, with salaried occupation, volunteering, political participation and self reliance in every day's activity in order to live independently.

This model recognizes that the elderly are not a homogenous group and that personal diversity increases with age. It takes under consideration the interaction between people and exogenous factors that define the functional ability from a young age. This approach recognizes the multiple and determinant health factors while establishing cross-sectional policy strategies.

Taking under consideration the variability of experience and capability in the elderly, lifelong approach suggests a

series of actions: preserving independence and preventing disability in healthy elder people, reversing a probable functional deterioration through rehabilitation after a mild or moderate organic disorder, and reassuring a good quality of life for people with permanent disability or near the end of life.

Preserving autonomy and independence as a person grows older, is a major target for people and organizations that define politics. Furthermore, ageing takes place amongst others – friends, coworkers, neighbors, family members. This is the reason why interdependence and solidarity between generations (give and take amongst people, older and younger) are important principles of active ageing. The child of yesterday is the adult of today and tomorrow's grandmother or grandfather. The quality of life that will have as grandparents, depends on the hazards and the opportunities that they came across during their life, as well as the way the next generations will provide mutual help and support when in need⁴.

Before reviewing the promotion strategies, we must emphasize on treating slow progressing, chronic diseases, as they affect the quality of life of the elderly to a great extend. Diseases such as diabetes, cancer, dementia (e.g. Alzheimer), osteoporotic fractures, obstructive pulmonary disease, are conditions that affect a person's life due to their chronicity and weigh on them and their family while ageing. Most of them can be prevented, while others respond well to pharmaceutical treatment. Therefore, an ideal general practice would be to attempt to prevent all the above mentioned diseases from a young age by, for instance, quitting smoking, exercising, establishing proper eating habits and screening for cancer, in order to decrease the probability of manifesting such a disease. Hence, the evaluation should be carried on for life (lifelong approach).

In order to promote the concept of active ageing in society, volunteering must be motivated. Volunteering is nowadays a way of offering new learning stimuli to the elderly, so that they can contribute to society. Based on European Initiative 2011 a European Year of Volunteering, the European Year 2012 indicated that volunteering is another great parameter of active ageing. Local and regional sections can benefit from possible European Funding for supporting volunteerism².

The elderly have plenty of free time and many of them wish to be active members of society and contribute to a voluntary basis. They should be offered the opportunity to be trained on the principles and values of volunteering, to participate in their community's volunteering actions. Moreover, by volunteering they secure their active participation in society and politics. At a social level, we face the necessity to design lifelong learning programs and most importantly, to interconnect the established knowledge of the elderly to new technologies, as well as to keep up with scientific and technological progress. Information campaigns are crucial in order to educate society about the elderly social and biological identity, the fundamental problems they face, and their capability of active participation in social life.

At a worldwide level, on May 2005, the World Health Assembly confirmed its support in the active ageing concept, inviting all the member states to develop, apply and assess the politics and programs in order to promote healthy and active ageing and to lead WHO to reinforce the ageing program activities and support the vision of this policy. Active ageing has been proposed as a cross-curricular in the new featured Community Health Program (2007-2013)⁸.

At a European level, many states are involved in programs for active ageing, some of which are presented concisely below⁷.

1. The Voice of European Seniors (Romania/Portugal): a senior volunteer's exchange program, aiming to share experience and knowledge (states expertise exchange). Of major importance is reinforcing the seniors' motivation and excitement, improving their life and upgrading their self-esteem through active participation in society. <http://projectotio.wordpress.com/give~~V>
2. SEVEN- Senior European Volunteers Exchange Network: an international network of organizations that promote the exchanges between senior volunteers. It aims to create a central point where all the involved organizations will be able to find information and advice about how to follow their programs and find associates. The Organizations-members are NGO, local authority entities, universities and research centers. www.seven-network.eu
3. Social networking for senior citizens. This project intends to expand the social benefits of modern information and communication technology for the seniors. The principal asset is a social networking online platform that targets exclusively older people and provides a broad spectrum of content. This program offers support and guidance to the senior users and to those who work with them. In addition, it encourages the online accessibility, which includes software and collaboration with local and regional entities to provide online services. www.laterlife.eu
4. SEELERNETZ- Seniors in Europe are trained in networking (lifelong learning program). SEELERNETZ is an educational program that aims to create opportunities for the seniors and for those who work with them in order to participate in the learning process through social networking. This project, with partners in five European countries, promotes the exchange of experiences between seniors regarding topics of everyday activity. It will publish some recommendations for education through networking and the impact of the broader social participation on the quality of people's life. www.seelernetz.eu

Conclusion - Suggestions

The active ageing policy aims to create more working opportunities for senior citizens of the European Union. To accomplish this, the working conditions must be improved, the workers have to be better informed and further educated and lifelong learning programs need to be created. Meanwhile, it is crucial to revise the tax and benefits systems that will encourage elder people to work for more years. The local and regional authorities play a determining part in providing support, creating the conditions under which senior citizens will be able to fully participate in their local society. European funding programs can provide support to this direction. The active participation of the elderly in the society can contribute to the distribution of time, energy and experience for active citizens' initiative, their contribution to volunteering organizations and social groups, as well as in the family.

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