

# Ten Years After the World Assembly on Aging

by Charlotte Nusberg

**A** common activity this commemorative year of the 10th anniversary of the World Assembly on Aging (WAA) among the relatively small group of persons who follow aging issues internationally was to ponder the success of the conference and the sophisticated Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging (VIPAA) it produced. Often this review proved negative, leading to statements such as "*We have little about which to celebrate.*"

Attention has tended to focus on awareness-raising and advocacy, which in itself is of cardinal importance. Yet, that has not been sufficiently translated into actual programs that have an impact on older persons. (**Francis Mahon Hayes**, Acting President, UN General Assembly, October 15, 1992)

While few can deny the veracity of this statement, this review process has led to a tendency to impose unrealistically high expectations on what the WAA and VIPAA could have achieved during the past decade—tendencies that were fostered during the Assembly itself.

There is little question but that most persons who attended the WAA in 1982 thought the conference a resounding success because of the awareness-raising engendered about aging issues worldwide and the relative ease with which international consensus could be achieved, resulting in the widely admired VIPAA. Many successes, however, contain within them the seeds of new problems. High expectations combined with the lack of provision of the resources needed at the international level to make a meaningful contribution in technical assistance and other forms of foreign aid were bound to lead to disappointment.

More importantly, it is easy to forget that international action, particularly in the social welfare arena, while certainly affecting thinking about policy and program directions, is rarely decisive. By and large, social policy is formed as the result of domestic imperatives. It is, thus, not surprising that those countries with particularly rapid aging populations—*e.g.*, China, Japan, Germany, the Scandinavian countries—have formulated national plans of action on aging or instituted extensive changes

in policy direction. Similarly, many nations with still relatively small aging populations have chosen to do little anticipatory planning for demographic transitions that will not occur until after the turn of the century.

. . . drawing attention to the issue of aging is not the same thing as creating the political will to deal with it. . . Aging must be seen as an important, worthy and urgent matter. We need to set in place first the moral, psychological and intellectual infrastructure before we dare hope that any initiatives will have a broad and lasting effect.

(**Julia T. de Alvarez**, Alternate Permanent Representative for the Dominican Republic to the UN before the UN General Assembly, October 15, 1992)

Considerably larger social and political forces than the deliberations of an international assembly have been at play during the last decade which have augured poorly for some of the world's elderly. The upheavals in eastern Europe for example, have had dramatically negative consequences on many older persons:

The disintegration of social immunity, the understanding of the fact that extraordinary privations and enormously hard work throughout the life have resulted neither in personal wealth nor in the prosperity of the state, provokes among our elderly a bitter feeling of their uselessness, of a life lived in vain. It leads to acute moral and emotional stresses among old people. (**E.A. Pamfilova**, Minister for Social Protection of the Population, Russia before the UN General Assembly, October 17, 1992)

This has led a Czech official to call for: the elaboration of some kind of an international emergency network for the elderly, the purpose of which would be to assist those populations where the elderly are affected by an unexpected and acute change of their situation and where existing political and economic systems are failing." (**Eduard Kukan**, Permanent Representative of Czechoslovakia to the UN before the UN General Assembly, October 15, 1992)

The catastrophe of AIDS has also had its unanticipated impact on older persons who, in some African villages

for example, may be the sole adult survivors remaining to take care of grandchildren orphaned through the deaths of their AIDS-infected parents.

It is said by the experts that Africa will experience the impact of aging in significant proportions after the year 2025. This may give the false impression that we have time. We don't. Because the problems such as AIDS, demographic aging may be realized sooner than later in our societies. (**Q.C. Gondwe**, Deputy Minister of Community Services, Malawi before the UN General Assembly, October 16, 1992.)

Global economic recession and local political conditions have also had their negative impact on many older persons and the families who are their main providers, particularly in developing countries (see the eloquent testimony of witnesses from Zaire, Sierra Leone and South Africa elsewhere in this issue). And in some developed countries, there are now younger people who show less commitment to the "social contract," which extends benefits to older persons, and more fear that the benefits now in place for the elderly will no longer be available to them in their own old age. Elsewhere, the universality of benefits are threatened.

The difficulties faced by the UN Trust Fund on Aging, also created at the WAA, and the more recently established Banyan Fund reflect not only economic recession but the continuing lack of an international constituency for aging. This is also evident from the relatively poor attendance by government delegates at the special two-day session of the UN General Assembly devoted to aging, October 16-17, 1992, and in the unwillingness of the UN to provide additional resources to assist in the implementation of the suggested global and national targets on aging approved by the Assembly during that session. (Approval of an International Year for Older Persons in 1999 was almost stalled over the fear it might have budget implications.)

Undoubtedly, reviewing circumstances such as these led the world-renowned geriatrician, **Dr. Robert Butler**, to conclude that there has been "virtually no response commensurate with the dimensions of the problem since the World Assembly on Aging."

Nevertheless, in viewing the global horizon, it is also easy to identify bright spots and trends that augur well for the future of older persons. The antecedents for some of these developments can certainly be seen in the cross-fertilization of ideas that occurred at the WAA and its preparatory meetings. Others represent the natural evolution of domestic policy.

Among the most striking of these positive developments is the changing image of older persons from marginalized, inactive, passive and sickly to reasonably healthy, active contributing and assertive. This is seen in the emphasis now being placed on productive aging as opposed to providing for the elderly. In the United Kingdom, for example, Age Resource has been created to complement the long-established Age Concern England.

Good health, together with the knowledge found in the experience of past generations in transmitting culture and values, means that "productive aging" is an idea that is gaining ground. (**Senator Ricardo Navarrette**, Chile, before the UN General Assembly, October 16, 1992)

The change in image is also reflected in older persons' greater participation in political life—from being consulted regularly on issues affecting their lives to the formation of "grey" political parties in countries such as Argentina and Norway. It is reflected in the proliferation of seniors' organizations around the world—these have long been common in the more developed nations; India, Pakistan and Malaysia are only a few of the developing countries that now have active seniors' groups.

Another sign of progress is the definitive shift that has taken place in some countries away from institutional care to coordinated care in the community in recognition of the desires of older persons themselves and the belief that such care is more cost-effective.

One of the most important reassessments in the welfare for elderly people in the Nordic countries has been the gradual shift of emphasis from services in institutions to services in the community.

. . . the development of our national policies for the elderly should be based on the following principles. The boundaries between institutional and open care have to be broken. Elderly people in need of care should be able to choose between the two. Alternative ways of producing the necessary services have to be discussed openly. Cooperation between social welfare and health care has to be intensified. The strict division of labor between different categories of professionals within the service network has to be reduced and informal care and voluntary activities have to be encouraged. (**Tauno Kaaria**, Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland to the UN, UN General Assembly, October 15, 1992)

And in Malta:

Social policy in Malta has dramatically developed

from the traditionally “problem-oriented,” depersonalized approach to the present day community oriented personalized approach covering the totality of the individual’s well-being while reflecting the centrality of the human person and the human family.” (Dr. Antoine Mifsud Bonnici, Parliamentary Secretary for the Care of the Elderly, Malta, before the UN General Assembly, October 15, 1992)

Not only is care in the community being emphasized, but there is a stronger recognition of the many players involved in community care—family members and other informal supports, voluntary organizations, governmental agencies and the commercial sector. There is increased appreciation of the family’s role in caregiving and the need for the public sector to support that role. Relatively few speakers at the special UN General Assembly session on aging still sought to place

the entire responsibility on the family—echoes of which could still be heard at the WAA 10 years ago.

At the international level, new forms of bilateral assistance are taking place in the aging field. At the initiative of Spain, an inter-American network has been formed to provide technical assistance in the areas of aging and disability. Germany has entered into agreements with some countries of eastern Europe to extend similar assistance, and is sponsoring aging projects in a few developing countries. And at the regional level, the European Community now has a separate item in its budget for aging programs.

There is much about which to be encouraged. This does not refute the need, however, to infuse more vision, political will and resources into finding strategies to deal with the dilemmas posed by the success of our public health and family planning programs—a rapidly aging world population.

## The Elderly in the Global Community: An Untapped Resource

Productive Aging was the theme running through the two-day conference in New York, September 30 to October 1, 1992 sponsored by the NGO (non-governmental organization) Committee on Aging in New York in honor of the anniversary of the World Assembly on Aging and the adoption of its International Action Plan on Aging. Four key points framed the meeting’s agenda:

- “Older Persons are a productive resource—to themselves, their families, communities, and the world.
- Age discrimination in all its forms, particularly mandatory retirement is unjust.
- Cooperation, not exploitation, among the human generations is a fundamental value for survival and must be enhanced.
- The elderly in the developed world can join others—including the UN, government, NGOs, and the private sector—to address the aspirations and needs of older adults living with little or no direct means for their sustenance.”

To these ends, the conference urged that “National and international agencies, as well as NGOs, should include older persons in the planning of sustainable

*development and environmental protection activities at all levels—local, national, and international communities . . . what is important is that older persons become recognized as valued members of their communities’ development. Not burdens, but contributors.”*

The conference also recommended that “National statistics and the GNP include the contributions of the elderly as unpaid volunteers, promoting the fact that the elderly in all societies are valuable, productive and essential—a resource. Whether in developed countries or in the developing world, older unpaid workers share a similar injustice—their work is not publicly valued. It is not valued because it is not included in census data, or national social program reports, or occupational classifications.”

Finally, the conference “encouraged elderly persons to pass on positive cultural and traditional values to the young . . . We should not move so fast that we do not have time to celebrate our heritage. We must learn to live with the past that is alive within us and make that past live in our children’s lives.”