

From Protection to Empowerment: A Rights-Based Transformation in Global Ageing Policies and the Evolution Toward Age-Friendly Systems



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Themes articulated by international organizations reflect a coherent and progressively evolving global policy orientation toward healthy ageing, rights-based approaches, and system-level transformation.

The theme of digital equity for all ages has underscored the growing recognition of digital exclusion as a significant determinant of health. Older adults face structural barriers related to access, financial resources, and digital literacy, which in turn limit their capacity to benefit from telehealth services, social connectivity, and essential services.

Bridging the digital divide is emphasized not merely as a technological issue, but as a fundamental requirement for reducing health inequalities and promoting active and healthy ageing.

In a changing world, the resilience of older individuals signals a shift from a frailty-focused perspective to an approach centered on agency and empowerment. Within the context of multiple global crises—such as the pandemic, climate change, and geopolitical instability—older adults have increasingly been recognized as active contributors to societal resilience. Particular attention has been drawn to the cumulative inequalities faced by older women, highlighting the necessity of intersectionality-based approaches in ageing policies.

Subsequently, the discourse has evolved explicitly toward a rights-based framework, with a focus on implementing the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights across generations. This perspective brings attention to ageism and structural inequalities and calls for legal and institutional reforms to ensure equality, dignity, and social participation. Intergenerational solidarity has thus assumed a central role, with ageing recognized as an integral component of the life-course.

Focusing on health and social care infrastructures, the concept of ageing with dignity emphasizes the strengthening of care and support systems. In this context, the need to reinforce long-term care systems has been highlighted, with priority given to the development of person-centered, integrated, and sustainable care models. Elements such as workforce planning, support for caregivers, and financial sustainability have been linked to the goal of universal health coverage.

Over time, the discourse has matured along the axis of participation and empowerment, culminating in the theme of older individuals shaping local and global actions. This approach positions older adults not merely as beneficiaries of policy, but as active agents who participate in decision-making processes and shape societal transformation. In this regard, participation, advocacy, and social inclusion have been strongly emphasized.

Overall, these approaches reveal an evolution from addressing structural barriers and inequalities toward empowerment, participation, and system-level transformation. This trajectory reflects a shift in gerontology and public health from deficit-based perspectives toward a holistic, rights-based, and capability-oriented model of ageing. Considering the thematic evolution shaped in recent years under the leadership of the World Health Organization, future projections are expected to involve not only thematic continuity but also a deepening focus on operationalization and measurable impact. In this process, the discourse is increasingly shifting from awareness and advocacy toward implementation, governance, and accountability.

In this context, the construction of age-friendly systems is likely to emerge as a central priority for sustainable futures. This projection is grounded in three main trends: 1-**From rights-based approaches to implementation:**

This transition is expected to be supported by concrete policy instruments, indicators, and monitoring mechanisms, particularly through legal regulations and performance metrics in combating ageism. 2-**System integration and multisectoral governance:**

This approach is likely to deepen through the integration of health, social services, digital infrastructure, urban planning, and climate policies. Accordingly, “age-friendly systems” will extend beyond healthcare services to encompass a holistic ecosystem perspective. 3-**The co-productive role of older adults:** Older individuals are expected to be positioned as co-producers in policy design, service planning, and research processes. This reflects the institutionalization of the principle “nothing about us without us.”

In the coming years, priority areas are anticipated to include climate change and ageing (adaptation strategies), digital health and artificial intelligence (access, ethics, and inclusivity), sustainable financing of long-term care, and the measurement of healthy ageing. In conclusion, the most robust projection for the future is a transition in discourse from “protection and coverage” toward “implementation, integration, and co-production.”