



# INFLUENCING CHANGE FOR AGEING POPULATIONS



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# Influencing change for ageing populations

*With improved medical science and a higher standard of living, most countries have seen a steady increase in life expectancy. This has resulted in ageing populations, which are not always being supported and their potential ignored. The Active Ageing Index (AAI) measures how countries perform in terms of tapping into the potential of their older populations, with the aim of highlighting good practices to encourage change around the world*

Between 2000 and 2015, the global average life expectancy increased by five years, representing the fastest increase since the 1960s. While this is clearly a positive, it varies across countries and there are differential implications for supporting ageing populations in countries around the world. The concerns are mostly centred round a few issues including financial, welfare and quality of life. This is where the evidence generated by the Active Ageing Index (AAI) comes in.

Professor Asghar Zaidi believes active ageing means more than just staying in employment or in good health, arguing it is important that as an individual gets older, they remain: 'a full member of society in all domains of life'. He believes it is vital to realise the full potential of older people and that they should be empowered to live active and healthy lives. The AAI provides an evidence base to assess how countries perform across specific domains of active ageing, with the ultimate aim that countries will benefit from the information when it comes to implementing policy changes to improve their performance in realising the potential of older populations.

The AAI project is managed jointly and contributed to by the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMP) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). The first phase of the project was completed at the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research in Vienna, Austria. The second

phase was completed last year at the University of Southampton in the UK, also home to the third phase launched in 2017, and set to conclude in 2018.

## DEVELOPING A STRUCTURE

Often the context in which the topic of ageing populations is discussed is negative and one-sided, expressing concern around social protection and affordability, and generally viewing older people as a burden. The AAI framework however, emphasises

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the scope for social investment, taking the view that the cost of managing ageing actively is cheaper than the passive management of older people where they are dependent on the state or family.

The team behind the AAI hope to answer crucial questions, such as how some countries perform better than others, what specific areas can be improved, and what policy lessons can be shared.

The work of the AAI is broken down into four domains, which were developed following advice from the UNECE AAI Expert Group and using the guidelines developed for the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. The Expert Group is made up of academics, statisticians and representatives from supra-national and international organisations including OECD, the European Commission, Eurostat and Age Platform Europe. The four domains

of the AAI are: employment; participation in society; independent, healthy and secure living; and capacity and enabling environment for active ageing. The fourth domain is seen as a novel contribution of the AAI project, as it assesses the use of human capital and the access to age-friendly enabling environments that can be tapped into to improve the quality of life of older populations and achieve more sustainable public welfare systems.

Within each of the four domains there are a number of indicators examining specific factors, such as employment across a specific age range of older workers, voluntary activities, financial security, educational attainment and lifelong learning, access to health services and healthy life expectancy. The AAI indicators were drawn using four major European household surveys: the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), the EU Labour Force Survey, the European Social Survey and the European Quality of Life Survey.

## MUTUAL LEARNING IN SHARING

The AAI has already begun to achieve its objectives, as its evidence base has been used by a number of countries to introduce new policy changes or review their existing approach to active ageing. Latvia and Malta have developed an active ageing strategy for 2010-16, using the references of the AAI; Estonia included AAI data in its Welfare Development Plan; and Poland introduced a new long-term seniors policy for 2014-20, which was developed after the country had a particularly low ranking in the first set of AAI results. Germany has been reviewing the AAI measure for its use as a comparison across regions. These are just a selection of examples of the influence the AAI has had.

Given the urgency of supporting growing ageing populations, it is necessary that governments act fast to commit adequate resources to implement their strategies. However, due to competing priorities, limited funding and local level governments not fully convinced of the validity of active ageing strategies, the rhetoric is not translated into policy actions. Furthermore, active ageing needs coordination between different government and non-government agencies within a country, and this coordination is often not in place.

Despite these challenges, Zaidi and the AAI team have big ambitions in terms of what it can achieve. They accept that 'attitudinal and behavioural change that impacts on policy change is a long-term process.' As Zaidi explains: 'We hope our work will highlight that the views held about the high expense of adopting comprehensive policies for active ageing will be proved false, and that the AAI will demonstrate that investment in active ageing strategies can be cost-effective and contribute towards the strengthening of societies.'

## AGEING SUCCESSFULLY

The AAI enables individual countries to see where they currently stand in their results on active ageing, comparing themselves against

other countries. This comparison is vital, as it will help to highlight where potential can be found and identify where a country can learn from the achievements of others. The sharing of best practices is invaluable, as it will inform policymakers of the direction they could/should take and successes that can be replicated. The AAI provides a strong monitoring tool to see how and where progress is made.

In terms of what has been achieved so far, without doubt the evidence made available through the AAI is raising awareness of the challenges and opportunities for older people, as well as encouraging the search for better ways to develop their full potential. This is not just to enhance their individual wellbeing, but also to support the future sustainability of public welfare systems.

*Active ageing means more than just staying in employment or in good health... it is important that as an individual gets older, they remain a full member of society in all domains of life*

This is reflected in the figures from the AAI, which show that results improved between 2008 and 2012, despite many countries experiencing an economic downturn and austerity during the same period.

Zaidi believes that EU institutions are: 'playing an important role in disseminating good practices and incentivising research and innovations,' but this needs to continue and the AAI focus must remain. At the same time, there are plans to continue to expand the geographical coverage and scope of the AAI, and to fine-tune the methodology behind it. Importantly, a highly visible dissemination and communication strategy needs to be adopted to publicise the AAI to extend its influence and impact. Together these plans have the potential to take the work of the AAI even further, and to realise real change, which will be even more valuable in the coming years in achieving the goal of 'leaving no one behind' in the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

## Project Insights

### FUNDING

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Geneva • The European Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Brussels

### COLLABORATORS

University of Southampton, UK • Advised by the UNECE AAI Expert Group consisting of representatives of governments of EU Member States and of the European Commission, as well as international organisations such as OECD and Age Platform Europe.

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### LEAD RESEARCHER BIO

**Asghar Zaidi** is Professor in International Social Policy at University of Southampton, UK, where his research spans active and healthy ageing, the wellbeing of older people and persons with disabilities, and dynamic microsimulation modelling. Since 2012, he has led the research work of the Active Ageing Index Project of the European Commission and UNECE and the Global AgeWatch Index project of HelpAge International. He has recently developed the Wellbeing in Later Life (WILL) Index for the UK, working alongside Age UK London. A visiting Professor at London School of Economics and Senior Advisor at the European Centre, Austria, Zaidi was previously Senior Economist at the OECD in France. He also served as an economic adviser for the UK's Department for Work and Pensions and as a research officer at London School of Economics and University of Oxford, UK.

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## Impact Objectives

- Develop a high-quality and independent evidence base concerning active ageing and use that evidence to highlight good practices around Europe, which will ultimately help individuals and countries improve the quality of life and wellbeing of older populations
- Help governments understand that the policy of social investment and empowerment of older populations to live active and engaged lives is more cost-effective than the passive management of older people dependent on the state or family
- Develop a credible methodology for a metric highlighting the participation of older people in different dimensions of their lives, and identify the potential of older people that goes untapped

# Striving for active ageing

Across the globe, countries are struggling to support ageing populations and there is a great urgency that they address this challenge with suitable policies. We spoke to **Asghar Zaidi**, Professor in International Social Policy at the **University of Southampton** in the UK, who along with his team have developed the **Active Ageing Index (AAI)**, which evaluates how countries perform on this issue



### Why is active ageing so important?

From an individual's standpoint, active ageing is about growing older in good health and as a full member of society, independent in their daily life and engaged as a citizen.

For society as a whole, with life expectancy on the increase, it is important to realise the full potential of older people by setting in place the conditions to empower people to live active and healthy lives throughout the course of their lives.

An active and healthy life remains one of the major aspirations in countries around the world. This aspiration is critical, not just in making public welfare systems financially sustainable, but it is also a strong prerequisite for improving the quality of life and wellbeing of people of all ages.

### What is the objective of the Active Ageing Index (AAI)?

Although discussions have taken place and the importance of promoting active ageing is understood, we need to go beyond that rhetoric and form effective public policies and create a high-quality and independent evidence base. That evidence can be used to highlight countries who are addressing

the issue effectively and who have good practices in place. We need to understand how individual experiences of ageing can be enriched with national and sub-national policies.

The AAI has generated this new evidence base by quantifying the extent to which older people have and can realise their potential in three distinct domains that determine their experiences of active and healthy ageing: employment; social participation; and independent living. An additional fourth

interventions on the cross-national evidence of active and healthy ageing indicators.

The latest AAI results for the EU28 show that Sweden is at the top of the rankings, followed closely by Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, the UK and Ireland. Four southern European countries (Italy, Portugal, Spain and Malta) are middle ranked countries together with most other Western European countries including Germany. Greece and the majority of the Central and Eastern European countries are at the bottom of the rankings.

*The AAI... captures how countries differ with respect to participation, engagement and human capital of their older populations. It points to the enabling environment for active and healthy ageing*

domain goes beyond observing the actual experiences of active and healthy ageing, and captures how countries differ with respect to human capital of their older populations and in providing the enabling environment for active and healthy ageing.

The AAI is calculated for, in the first instance, the 28 EU Member States, as well as for a number of other non-EU countries (including Norway, Switzerland, Russia, the US and Canada), thus it has provided insights to policymakers around the world to base their

An important finding is that the current top-ranked countries such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands barely pass the 40 points mark, which highlights that even the best performing countries have scope for improvement. The countries at the other end of the spectrum (Greece at the bottom, preceded by Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia) have AAI values below 30 points, suggesting they have as yet failed to tap into a good deal of the potential of active ageing of older populations in their countries.