

Presentation to the Follow-up Meeting to the December 2007 ECLAC session that adopted the Brasilia Declaration

Susanne Paul, President, GLOBAL ACTION ON AGING, September 17, 2008, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

Muchas gracias, Señors y Señoras,

Thank you for inviting me to this historic ECLAC session as you begin work leading toward a United Nations Human Rights Convention on Ageing. In particular, my thanks go to the Government of Brazil and its Aging/Human Rights Office. I am honored to join all of you in this effort.

My organization, Global Action on Aging, monitors aging policy at the UN. We are known for our work documenting older persons' right to social protection, to health care and the opportunity to lead a life of respect and fulfillment. Twice weekly, we post reports and analyses from every region of the world to our large website (www.globalaging.org). We publish in all six UN languages. Over the past decade, our website has become one of most widely read sites devoted to aging in the world. Readers include government officials, diplomats, news media, writers, students, and many aging NGOs as well as thousands of older persons across the globe. In fact, our Global Aging website attracts over 1.4 million hits every month.

Over the years Global Action on Aging has intervened at the UN for human rights protection of older persons caught in emergencies, for those living in internally displaced camps as well as elders living in the poorest, least developed countries. We've held international meetings on older women's human rights; we've examined IMF and World Bank policies that forced many countries to privatize their public pensions. In short,

GAA—along with other NGOs— has pressed for human rights standards for older persons in many areas. In the last year GAA and others have studied closely the national reports emerging from implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging that was adopted in 2002. Though we respect the voluntary gains that some governments and regions achieved with this non-binding agreement, we are convinced that the world needs a Human Rights Convention that legally binds governments to protect their older citizens. We know that something much stronger than “voluntarism” is needed to secure lasting improvements in the lives of older people.

When ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) adopted its Brasilia Declaration in December 2007, calling for a Human Rights Convention and a Special Rapporteur on aging, many NGOs cheered the news. Your Declaration drew the attention of the world community and fueled action on aging. For example, we expect the UN’s Committee to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to consider very soon a General Recommendation on “older women,” a category left out and ignored for the first 29 years of CEDAW’s life. In October, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon will suggest that the UN General Assembly call for a global study of older persons’ human rights. Your work this week in Rio will surely encourage more action on aging at the UN and around the world in the days ahead. Some governments may introduce a Resolution for a global study during the upcoming UN General Assembly. Perhaps a government gathered here will brief Third Committee members in early October about the need for a Convention. And, it’s possible that interested States may sponsor a joint event during the February 2009 Commission for

Social Development. NGOs, on our part, may develop materials on abuse of older persons, for example, to test the UN human rights machinery.

Global Action on Aging welcomes these developments from ECLAC governments. Over the past decade, we have collected many concrete examples of human rights problems that older persons face. We have also invited our partners and readers across the globe to share their concerns about aging human rights. As a result, we learned that NGOs active in aging share many of ECLAC's concerns — particularly the right to social protection, social security, health care, housing, care-giving and freedom from all forms of abuse.

While identifying human rights issues is easy, we know that sometimes governments express concern about the financial cost of elder programs. Nevertheless, governments in the Latin American and Caribbean region have upgraded and broadened their existing social pension programs. Some ECLAC countries have instituted such social pensions in major cities, assuring a livelihood for the poorest old people. Also, governments have struggled to assure access to low cost generic medications for their old and young people. Many ECLAC nations have helped establish local senior citizen councils to assist and give voice to older persons. At the same time, older people's organizations have emerged in a number of countries. These government and citizen initiatives have helped raise the living standards of poor older persons. You, in ECLAC, have demonstrated that great innovation is possible, even if budgets are tight. And, as everyone knows, helping an older person has a significant multiplier effects as they assist families and neighbors with daily chores, caregiving and a host of other tasks that help hold communities together.

As we begin to move toward a human rights convention on aging, NGOs do have concerns about the process that will guide consideration of a convention. We are grateful—and honored—that the organizers of this meeting invited a number of aging NGOs to attend and gave us the chance to speak with governments. You've circulated background documents so that we knew the context of the discussions and assured language translation so that we could understand one another. Both governments and NGOs learned from the participatory process adopted during the recent Disability Rights Convention. As you will recall, the diverse NGO organizations -- representing blind, deaf, mobility impaired, mentally challenged and others -- united around a powerful slogan; "Nothing about us without us," a slogan that embraced their desire to participate. And the governments reached out to include them. At this point, older persons will want to express their ideas, experiences and recommendations about human rights with governments. You've already signaled that you take NGOs' ideas seriously and are ready to include us.

Global Action on Aging, with its multi-lingual office staff working near the UN, wants to join with others to mobilize Aging NGOs, from every sector and field to offer their expertise, be it older persons' organizations or those groups devoted to scientific, academic, trade union, legal, religious, development, social services and other concerns—all .who can offer important expertise. There are many wonderful groups and umbrella organizations that focus on older persons and their lives, including the UN/NGO Committees on Ageing in Geneva, New York, Vienna and my respected colleagues here today representing Caritas, the International Association of Geriatrics and Gerontology, and HelpAge International. In addition, we've learned from the testimony

of the Senior Federation Organization, the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, the Latin American Confederation of Retired Workers, the Curacao-based Confederation of Older Persons and Pensioners, the Brazilian Public Defenders and a diverse number of other national and regional organizations.

Global Action on Aging wants to join aging NGOs in dialogue and exchange with governments, helping to sort out thorny issues and suggesting innovative approaches. Specifically, GAA will post relevant materials to our website (www.globalaging.org) as governments move toward a Convention. We will use our site as a home for discussions, debate and ideas about the Convention process. And we have staff and office resources in the immediate UN community in New York to assist and help you with this project. Please call on us.

Working together, Governments and NGOs representing the world's elders can build a new aging movement that sustains older people, allowing us to contribute mightily to a society that needs our energy, intelligence and perspective. Together we will identify and define the human rights that older persons must exercise to live a full life. Finally, aging NGOs will come up with meaningful ways to review and enforce the human rights of older persons that must be built into any document.

ECLAC members have the vision and strategy to make tangible a Human Rights Convention for Older Persons. But you need the heart and compelling partnership of older persons to bring it to life. Let's continue our work together on this great project.

Susanne Paul, President
Global Action on Aging
777 UN Plaza, 6J, New York, NY 10017 USA

www.globalaging.org, s.paul@globalaging.org, globalaging@globalaging.org,
globalageing@yahoo.com

