

## **Susanne S. Paul – “Participation of Older Persons in Political and Public Life”**

Buenos Dias! What a pleasure to join you here at this important event.

My grateful thanks to CEPAL and the Government of Mexico City for your leadership and hospitality.

The people and governments of the Caribbean, Central and South America are leading the way for the promotion of the human rights of older persons, not only for the Region but also for the World.

I am going to speak about the participation of older persons in Political and Public Life and consider whether they have the capacity to press for their rights in our countries and in the world. I am also going to assess the strength of the Ageing Movement worldwide and evaluate the possibility of a convention to insure human rights for older people.

NGOs worldwide already have learned valuable lessons drawn from earlier human rights struggles. About ten years ago Women NGO's discovered that CEDAW, the Committee to enforce the UN's Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination against Women had never inquired about **older** women's rights. We supported CEDAW

Member, my friend Ferdous Begum, who believed that CEDAW must not exclude older women in its investigations. We presented evidence that older women faced discrimination due to their age. We lobbied CEDAW experts with reports and statistics. After several years of lobbying, approval seemed near. Then we learned that some European governments intended to block adoption. Within a few weeks, GAA and our partners contacted women's organizations across the globe. A campaign got rolling. We talked with governments, bombarded policy makers with emails and kept up the pressure. Policies began to change! Weeks later, CEDAW met and its members voted to support our proposal overwhelmingly. Older Women are now included in the CEDAW review process. Older women won an important victory due to global mobilization and governments learned to respect the women's movement and listen to our ideas. We have applied these same tactics of NGO action to the OAS process and to the UN process for a universal human rights instrument on aging. Everyone agrees that NGO mobilization and lobbying is essential in moving these processes forward.

Because women are the majority of the old, the women's movement is a vital ally in our aging work. The same is true of the disability organizations. But the aging rights movement is not confined to aging organizations themselves, but it is a coalition made up of many organizations with diverse but convergent concerns. Many are now working together to promote a regional convention on older persons' rights through the Organization of American States.

At the outset, we must understand that older persons face a stigma of aging known as Ageism that undermines their confidence and capacity to take on tasks. Yet there are hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of older people who are mobilized into organizations to advance their rights.

Older people today are rejecting the insults of "ageism" and speaking in public about their needs and their hopes for a better society. On November 9, 2011, the five largest French organizations of Older Persons demonstrated in front of the French National Assembly to deplore the situation of vulnerable old people in their country. Earlier, in October, thousands of French retirees had protested the government's

policies that lowered pensioners' purchasing power. In Spain on February 9, 2012, hundreds of thousands of people, including a large proportion of older persons, marched in Spanish cities protesting the reduction of severance payments and economic austerity. Later, Greek retirees took to the street when their government decided to lower pension payments. These impressive cases demonstrate how older persons can mobilize massively in their own interest and those of the broad popular movements. Older Europeans are ready to challenge government policies that reduce their pensions and their many other acquired rights.

Ageing groups take various approaches to governments. Some large, well-financed aging NGOs, such as AARP in the US or Age UK in Britain, have close ties to governments and can lobby on the "inside." Large as they are, however, they cannot succeed without a broadly-based grassroots movement with far-reaching and fundamental demands. Fortunately, millions of committed older people and their supporters are also active in small aging NGOs, informal organizations and people's movements. They are already at work in towns and villages across the

globe. Their protests and their victories don't get into the newspapers or onto websites-- but they are having an important impact and pushing the discussion forward.

Today, old people staff charities at the local level and provide services to other elders, such as food programs, transport to medical offices, or arranging long term care-giving. Others specialize in recreational events, town history celebrations, even dancing programs in the public square and more. Others focus on political mobilization and challenge negative policies.

Who helps older persons organize these initiatives? Sometimes, help comes from local government offices, religious groups, labor unions, veterans groups, women's societies, and others. They are allies in the political struggle. At other times, these groups join to demonstrate against government cuts to medical care or pensions. Consider Brazil's UGT, a labor union confederation that is clearly supportive of aging rights and closely interested in the debates at the UN.

Over the last five years, London-based HelpAge International has worked regionally to mobilize older persons to campaign for social

pensions, to demand action from governments, and to promote a human rights instrument. These examples show that large and small ageing groups have been knitting together action programs on a regional and global basis. They have been exchanging information, coordinating thinking and taking on advocacy tasks.

My organization, Global Action on Aging, for example, collects news about aging rights and aging policy from around the world and publishes reports in the six UN languages to our website ([www.globalaging.org](http://www.globalaging.org)) We promote NGO cooperation and we speak out about older persons' grievances so that all may share in this knowledge.

Because the world economy faces difficulties today, many older people fear that their governments will cut pensions, reduce or end medical care, cancel food programs to rural and needy elders, and generally weaken the social protections for the old. It is another round in the battles that began in the 1980s over structural adjustment and that have never stopped. Neo-liberalism is still attacking the people's benefits. When poverty rises, as is happening widely today, older

persons are often the first to suffer. So the challenge we face is very great indeed.

Let's look at the major regions. In Asia, economies have mostly been booming, but the advantages have not accrued to older people. In fact, traditional, family-based systems of social protection have eroded greatly, leaving many older persons worse off than in earlier times.

During the 1990's, the government of China created a National Committee on Ageing that supports thousands of local aging groups and provides housing, pensions, and even education. But older people, especially in the rural areas, are angry that they are not sharing in the larger national prosperity. There are hundreds of reports of older people's protests in villages and towns throughout China, protests that have surprised local officials and national leaders alike. Local victories have been won, as elders throughout the country have demanded more visibility and more say over their lives. This is a movement to watch in the future.

Africa:

In Africa the population is the youngest in the world, but there is now a large and growing group of older persons who are becoming aware of their rights and finding a voice. Many African economies are growing quickly with oil money and agricultural deals, but the income is concentrated in a few hands and poverty is widespread. Few countries have serious programs for their older citizens. Metang Paulette, founder of ACAMAGE based in Cameroon, explained to me recently that her aging organization, although very active, is too poor to buy posters and pens to make signs for its demonstrations. But throughout the land, older people are in motion. And as we saw in reports from the movements in Egypt and Tunisia, old people had the courage to join with persons of all ages in the struggle for democracy and a better life. Throughout the continent, older persons are engaged in protests against land-grabbing and the destruction of small farming by big international investors. New organizations and movements are arising. Some like Age in Action of South Africa are very large and long-established. In Ethiopia, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and many other



countries, aging organizations and movements have arisen. Africa has much to contribute to the global aging movement.

In Latin America, of course, there is a strong and diverse aging movement that has been in place for many years. Who can forget the broad mobilization against the pension cuts in the 1980s? In Argentina, women pensioners staged weekly protests in the center of Buenos Aires to call attention to their plight and their demands for justice. Since then, there has been a powerful movement to reverse the negative trends and to establish social pensions covering even the poorest people. Bolivia organized one of the first social pensions in the world, called the “dignity payment,” for every older person. The yearly distribution is a massive public event with older persons from every mountain and valley marching to collect their payment. Here in Mexico City older people are actively demanding their rights as I saw for myself last Friday morning after my arrival. On Filomen Mata Street, I came across a lively meeting of more than a hundred old people listening approvingly as a speaker called for more reliable access to subsidized bus rides for older citizens. Clearly more must be done to protect the continent’s older

population and the aging movement here is carrying forward its work, jointly with its allies. There is a spirit of optimism due to sympathetic governments and progressive national policies represented by so many people in this room.

In North America and particularly in the US, there are an enormous number of aging organizations at the national and local levels. Some work exclusively on service provision and others take on policy issues.

In a weakening economy, with government budget reductions, governments at every level have cut programs for older people and threaten future reductions to key benefits for health care and public pensions. In New York, the world's richest city, one out of three elders lives in poverty, but there is plenty of political action. Candidates standing for public office hesitate to cut benefits in the full view of the large number of older voters and their high level of political activity.

Encouraged by the Occupy Wall Street movement, older US citizens are protesting elder poverty and demanding their rights to social protection.

Recently, near my office, older persons protested in front of the world

headquarters of the giant drug company Pfizer, criticizing its high prices for key drugs and the profit-centered health care system more generally. From every region comes the message that we need a UN convention to define, defend and support the human rights of older persons. To achieve this goal, older citizens, must organize in strategic ways. We need experienced allies that will join us and give us much-needed support. For example, we must seek out trade unions in particular, because of their skills in organizing, negotiating, and keeping groups focused on the objective. They have experience being “in the opposition.” Religious organizations of every faith can help us too, especially at the grassroots level. Caregivers are another set of allies who understand our issues and sympathize with our goals. We must also establish multi-age alliances - informal groups of young people and the “near old” - who can be important friends and allies.

These are exciting times. The growing numbers of older people in the world can be an enormous resource for every nation— sharing their skills with families and communities. We must make such an exchange possible—with a human rights instrument that guarantees the well-being

of older people. Popular groups, such as peasant movements, neighborhood associations, and all those working at the grass roots will increasingly become supporters and advocates.

Most recently, nine NGOs with a “global reach,” formed The Alliance to Strengthen Older Persons’ Rights. It includes Global Action on Aging, AARP, Age UK, HelpAge International, AARP, the International Association for Geriatrics and Gerontology, the International Longevity Center, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, the International Federation on Aging, and the International Association of Homes and Hospitals for the Aging. Other groups are emerging across the globe. Agewell Foundation in India formed an organization in 2011 with major aging groups in its region, known as SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). This shows how effective coalitions can be built, even across hostile national divides.

Now is the time to act. You from the Caribbean, Central and South America have brought us a long way. Your proposals to the Organization of the American States show that your region is in the forefront. Already other regions are responding to your lead and

advancing their own ideas for a human rights document. In August, the UN General Assembly will meet once again as the Open Ended Working Group continues to examine the gaps in existing rights documents.

Please continue your leadership and demonstrate by example what you have achieved. Tell your story to the world; teach us your methods; send us your ideas. Older people and their allies everywhere will be encouraged and emboldened to move forward. Plan to speak at the United Nations' Open Ended Working Group about the gaps in implementation that you see in the existing human rights machinery. Yes, older people of the world will succeed in building a better future. Hand in hand, we will go forward together.

Thank you.