



Presentation by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 27th Session of the Human Rights Council - Item 3: Report of the Independent Expert on the promotion and protection of human rights of older persons
Geneva, 15 September 2014

Mr. President,

The number of elderly persons within the general population is fast increasing, and is foreseen to double within the next decade, tripling by 2050, thus reaching the number of two billion older persons. Rightly, the Report of the Independent Expert highlights such information and the actions undertaken by her predecessor and, more recently, by her own efforts to promote and expand respect for the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons.

The significance of this demographic trend too often is calculated only on the basis of projected economic impact. Thus one global economic “think tank” recently warned that “[t]he unprecedented pace of aging will have a significant negative effect on economic growth over the next two decades across all regions,” and concluded that “[t]he demographic dividend that drove economic growth in the past will turn into a demographic tax.”¹ My delegation is concerned, Mr. President, that such limited vision could constitute a serious threat to the full enjoyment of rights by older people. Regrettably, today’s efficient society tends to marginalize our vulnerable brothers and sisters, including older persons, as if they were only a “weight” and a “problem” for society.² To the contrary, the increasing number of older people, especially those who remain in good health, also means that they can make their contributions to society for longer periods of time. However, in order to assure that such positive developments will take place, we need to strategize and implement new approaches to structuring society in general, the world of work, health care infrastructure and delivery, the development of technology, intellectual property rights, social protection systems, and intergenerational social relationships.³

We noted with much interest, Mr. President, the reference made by the Independent Expert to The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing that imposed on States the

¹ *Population Aging Will Dampen Population Growth Over the Next Two Decades*,” Moody’s Investor Service, August 6, 2014, p.1.

² cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Participants in the 22nd International Conference of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers*, on “*The Pastoral Care of the Elderly Sick People*”, Vatican City, 17 November 2007.

³ Cf. “*Recommendations on Good Practices for the Promotion of the Rights of the Elderly*,” Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, Vatican City.

responsibility “to take measures to address ageing in order to achieve a society for all ages” and to mainstream “ageing into national and global development agendas”. Recall of this strategy is indeed timely during this period when the international community focuses its energy and attention on developing a Post-2015 Agenda. We feel compelled to raise the question, however, of how well this plan has been achieved to date, especially when we read of increasing numbers of ageing persons being constrained to leave their traditional and familiar homes in high-income countries to seek haven in developing regions of the world where the cost of long-term care is much less expensive. Surely, when we speak of preserving the enjoyment of all human rights, it is essential to respect and preserve, as far as possible the bonds of older persons with loved ones and with a familiar environment. This is especially the case when long-term, facility-based care becomes necessary for those who are severely incapacitated or no longer are able to make safe and responsible decisions for themselves.

In her Report, the Independent Expert made explicit reference to the obligations of States, “deriving from the rights to life and to a dignified death,” while maintaining that imprisonment and/or application of the death penalty for older persons should be prohibited.⁴ On various occasions, the Holy See has urged States in all parts of the world to abolish the death penalty within their respective jurisdictions. At the same time, the Holy See defends and upholds the right to life for all persons, from the moment of conception until natural death, and thus finds most alarming the increasing utilization of so-called “assisted suicide,” as well as the comments by some government officials that such extreme and harmful actions may warrant additional consideration since they could offer cost-saving benefits during a period of economic crisis.

Mr. President, a purely economic and functional approach toward elderly persons risks to create a culture where the weakest and most fragile members of society — the unborn, the poorest, the sick and elderly, the seriously handicapped, etc. — are in danger of being ‘thrown away’ from a system that must be efficient at all costs⁵ and thus impoverish society of their wisdom, experience, and enriching presence.

Thank you, Mr. President.

⁴Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Rosa Kornfeld-Matte, United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/27/46, 24 July 2014, par. 35.

⁵ Pope Francis, [*Message to Catholics taking part in annual Day for Life in Britain and Ireland*](#), 28 July 2013.