



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič Permanent Observer of the Holy See
to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 45th Session of the Human Rights Council, Agenda Item 3
Report of the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of all human rights by older persons

Geneva, 21 September 2020

Madam President,

The Delegation of the Holy See wishes to thank the Independent Expert for her report¹, which examines, in particular, the vital importance of data for the safeguarding of human rights among older persons.

The report specifically indicates “a serious gap in the data available” to capture the lived realities of older persons and the enjoyment of their human rights. This gap both undermines meaningful policymaking and normative action, and represents a clear and alarming sign of exclusion.² Furthermore, as highlighted by the Independent Expert, information and statistics on older people, when available, tend to depict them as a homogenous group, whereas the reality is very different.³ Such a limited perspective does not allow for an accurate assessment of their needs, nor for adequate appreciation of the precious contributions they offer to society, including their service as caregivers and volunteers.

In this sense, high quality, timely and reliable data is fundamental to identify, not only the needs, but also the human rights protection gaps affecting this population, with a view to improving the formulation and implementation of targeted measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly has proven the vital importance of data since it embodies an indispensable tool for monitoring the health emergency and for allowing specific and evidence-based responses.

Although COVID-19 poses a significant danger for every age, older persons are at a higher risk of contracting the virus⁴ and of experiencing greater likelihood of morbidity and mortality. Moreover, we cannot fail to mention here the grim toll that this health emergency has taken on older people in care homes and residential care facilities all around the world. Taking into account this dire situation, it is necessary to report accurately on COVID-19 infections and deaths occurring in such facilities and to improve monitoring of the situation within these centers.

¹ Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, A/HRC/45/14.

² Ibid. Cfr. par. 19 p. 6

³ Cfr. par. 37 p. 9 of the IE Report, and p. 9 of the SG Policy Brief.

⁴ Cfr. Policy Brief: the Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons, p. 2.

Madam President,

In emergency situations, such as the one we now are witnessing, older persons encounter greater obstacles to access timely and effective diagnosis and treatment. Indeed, amidst a health crisis of such magnitude, understaffed and overburdened hospitals and health facilities are forced to make complex choices on the use of medical resources.⁵ In this regard, my Delegation shares the concerns, voiced by the Independent Expert⁶, that decisions on the allocation of scarce medical resources, including ventilators, may be, or already have been, made solely on the basis of age.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to ensure that triage protocols and healthcare decisions are guided, in every circumstance, by thorough clinical assessments and a clear commitment to safeguarding the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and the dignity of every human person⁷.

Madam President,

Over the last months, the whole world has witnessed the heavy toll that COVID-19 has taken on an entire generation of older people. This generation, despite the fragility among many of its members, constitutes our most valuable resource, in terms of history, experience and invaluable teaching, for both the present and future of our human family. As stated by Pope Francis, the elderly represent “the roots and memory of a people (...), their experience is a precious treasure, indispensable to look to the future with hope and responsibility.”⁸

There is an urgent need to protect the lives of older people and to safeguard their human rights and dignity. To achieve such a noble and necessary goal, comprehensive, reliable and meaningful data is crucial to identify and eliminate impediments to the enjoyment of their human rights and to assess the effectiveness of measures in place.

Thank you, Madam President.

⁵ Cfr. p. 5 of the SG Policy Brief.

⁶ Cfr. par. 13, p. 5 of the IE Report, and p. 5 of the SG Policy Brief.

⁷ Cfr. par. 13 p.5 of the IE Report, and p. 5 of the SG Policy Brief.

⁸ “During this pandemic, cases have been reported in which older persons have not had an opportunity to give consent to medical treatment or have been put under undue pressure to refuse medical treatment in advance, such as being asked to sign do-not-resuscitate orders before receiving treatment.” (Cfr. SG Policy Brief p. 5)

⁸ Pope Francis, Message to the Members of the Italian National Association of Senior Workers, 15 October 2016.