Voice and meaningful engagement in the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing
A discussion paper
Why voice and meaningful engagement are important for the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing

Voice and meaningful engagement (V&ME) influence older people’s ability to enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms, can lead to more inclusive policies and innovative institutions and can improve access to and the quality of policies, systems and services.

The proportion of older people in the world is projected to be nearly 12% in 2030 and 16% in 2050, and the large majority live in low- and middle-income countries. Hearing their voices and meaningfully engaging older people is essential for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ensuring that older people are not left behind.

The United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030, which is aligned with the SDGs, is a global collaboration to achieve the vision of a world in which all people can live long, healthy lives. The plan for the Decade prioritizes four, strongly interconnected action areas:

• changing how we think, feel and act towards age and ageing;
• developing communities in ways that foster the abilities of older people;
• delivering person-centred, integrated care and primary health services responsive to older people; and
• ensuring that older people have access to long-term care if they need it.

These four areas are supported by four “enablers”:

• voice and meaningful engagement of older people, their families, caregivers and communities;
• nurturing leadership and capacity-building;
• connecting stakeholders; and
• improving data, research and innovation.
What are voice and meaningful engagement?

"Voice" has been broadly defined as the ability to express one's own views and interests and to influence policy and decision-making. Voice has and is affected by power. An older person's ability to act and to be an agent of change is related to the "power within". The "power to" expresses older people's capacity to exercise agency and to realize the potential of their human rights, citizenship or voice. "Power with" refers to the synergies that can be found through action with peers, collaboration with others or collective action and building alliances. When power is in the hands of the few, older people or specific groups of older people may be marginalized, with unequal sharing of decisions and resources, which can be referred to as "power over". Meaningful engagement is sustained, substantial, relevant involvement.

When older peoples' voices are not only heard but are also deeply valued, amplified and acted upon for transformative change, this is V&ME.

Leave no one behind

It is essential to ensure that those who have a genuine stake in a programme or activity are given the opportunity to express their voices and be meaningfully engaged in decisions that affect their lives. In doing so inequities must be addressed by actively involving those in situations of the greatest vulnerability, exclusion and invisibility, such as older women, minority communities, individuals with lower socio-economic status, and those with disabilities. Inclusion is essential for creating equitable, just communities.

1 See: What is the powercube? Brighton: University of Sussex, Power and Social Change; 2023 (powercube.net).
Operational actions to implement V&ME commitments in the UN Decade action areas

V&ME must be central to each action area and enabler and part of the full range of activities, such as assessment, planning, mobilizing, implementing, monitoring and evaluation.

Various cross-cutting principles are valid for all UN Decade action areas:

- Consider older people as central to each action area to allow them to tell their own stories and be fully integrated into defining the change to be made.
- Recognize that people have intersecting identities, all of which influence the choices they make and the changes they want.
- Apply a human rights-based approach to guide both the analysis and the implementation of activities for each action area of the Decade, including activities related to and supporting V&ME.
- Ensure that the appropriate legal framework is in place, with a budget, to give momentum to the actions.
- Learn from other groups about good practices and what could be adapted and replicated, such as for indigenous groups, people with disability and older caregivers.

Opportunities can be identified to increase the impact of V&ME in each Decade action area. Examples are given below.

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*In a human rights-based approach, principles of international human rights are at the core of policies, programmes and projects, including universal and inalienable rights, equality, non-discrimination, participation and accountability. The approach empowers individuals and communities, promotes holistic, integrated solutions while discouraging retrogression in rights.*
Action area 1: Change how we think, feel and act towards age and ageing

Awareness of and education about age, ageing and ageism are key to understanding how stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on age hinder the ability to express voice and use opportunities for meaningful engagement. For older people, active engagement can change their self-perception and increase their feeling of self-worth. Such engagement can include co-creation of programmes or policy arguments by and with older people. Intergenerational activities also help to change perceptions and promote understanding and mutual respect among generations, when certain conditions are met.\(^5\)

The media and social media can be used to provide popular education and normalize older people’s achievements. Narratives and stories by older people are very effective for changing representations of age and ageing.

Policies should be analysed from the point of view of age, and the presence and impact of ageism should be assessed and removed from instruments that permit discrimination on the basis of age. Age should be purposefully included in frameworks for diversity, equity and inclusion, with clear guidance on effective implementation.

Action area 2: Ensure that communities foster the abilities of older people

Enabling older people to age safely in a place (rural or urban) that is right for them, retain their health and autonomy for longer and continue to contribute to their communities is possible only if older people’s voices are heard and they are meaningfully engaged.

A starting point for developing better places in which to live and age is understanding older people’s needs and values and to embrace the ideas, solutions and innovations they propose. People who are developing age-friendly cities and communities should be informed about age and ageing and trained in participatory approaches and co-production. Such training can prevent negative biases or misconceptions about older individuals that may exclude them from decision-making. Its aim is to facilitate meaningful engagement of older people in various stages\(^6\) of the development of an age-friendly city, community or national programme.

The private sector can support the engagement and visibility of older people in the design and implementation of age-friendly communities and also as valuable workers and employers. Everyone must respect older people’s ability to continue to create and contribute to co-designing communities that support people of all ages and abilities, including in resource mobilization and management.

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Action area 3: Deliver person-centred, integrated care and primary health services responsive to older people

A V&ME approach to delivering person-centred, integrated care can empower individuals by raising awareness about their rights and opportunities. Heightened awareness can enable older individuals to assert their needs for high-quality health services and promote the development of more responsive care systems.

To implement V&ME effectively in clinical care, health and care workers must understand the nuances of ageing, acknowledge the diverse needs of older people, esteem older individuals, respect their goals and priorities, and involve them actively in all decisions that impact their lives. V&ME also requires the inclusion of older people in clinical research, particularly the most vulnerable people, who are frequently excluded. Older people should have options for engagement. While some have adapted to the digitalization of health-care systems during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, those with limited digital literacy may feel disconnected, exacerbating inequalities in engagement and access to information.

Older people should not only participate in discussions and decisions about their own health but can also play pivotal roles in shaping and overseeing health systems and services. They can hold health-care providers accountable and ensure that services meet their needs and rights. Empowering older individuals to engage in dialogue with authorities and advocate for their interests in local and national policies is an integral aspect of person-centred integrated care. Community initiatives, such as health-care volunteers and associations of older people, provide platforms on which older individuals can be engaged and heard. Such initiatives offer sustainable ways to improve primary health-care delivery and facilitate integration of health and care services.

Action area 4: Provide access to long-term care for older people who need it

In many countries, long-term care systems for older people have shortcomings, including lack of investment to ensure that the care that is provided meets older people's needs and preferences without financial burden and protects their autonomy, dignity and rights. Older people are still often considered passive recipients of care. Furthermore, informal caregivers – including family members, most of whom are women – are invisible to formal systems, and their work is not recognized, supported or valued.

A V&ME approach, with a mechanism to ensure accountability, offers older people and their informal carers opportunities for active engagement and holds governments accountable for delivery of long-term care that responds to their needs and preferences and protects and promotes their rights. Older people and their carers must be assisted in advocating for themselves by increasing their understanding of their power to contribute to decisions on policy and investment that affect the quality of long-term care. The approach must be holistic and interdisciplinary, with a rights-based, life-course approach. The aim should be to enable older people to make their own choices about where they live and receive care, including staying in their own home and community rather than moving to a long-term care facility.
Assessment of the quality of engagement of older people

Objective measurement of engagement with older people in programmes or advocacy provides an important baseline for setting targets. "Ladders of participation", such as the "ladder of citizen participation" and the UN Institute for Training and Research model, are good visual assessment tools, and can be adapted for initiatives for working meaningfully with older people and to redistribute power for decisions and resources, which are often highly contested areas.

Criteria can be set according to the desired change, with older individuals taking the lead. Progress can be measured by setting goals along the continuum of participation, for example, from "informing" [about rights and options for exercising them] to "partnership", an important step towards sharing power on the path to the highest level of "citizen control".

Such progression takes time and is not linear. Different levels of engagement may be relevant for different aspects of a project, and an organization may be involved in several projects and processes. To attain a higher level of engagement, older people must gain a sense of "power within", and those in positions of power must relinquish vested interests that influence programmes and policies, ultimately leading to genuine collaboration.

Analyse power relations and complementary actions relevant to older people

Understanding power relations [see above] in various contexts is the basis of the HelpAge International Voice Framework. After an analysis of who has what forms of power, the framework guides practitioners through complementary domains of action [informed; empowered; engaged; shared and combined; amplified and heard] in a rights-based approach and with accountability mechanisms to govern relations between older people as rights-holders and power-holders [national and local governments and other systems, including the private sector and non-profit organizations].

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7 Arnstein SR. A ladder of citizen participation. J Am Inst Planners. 1969; 35(4): 216–24. doi:10.1080/01944366908977225. The ladder illustrates how empowered public institutions and officials deny power to citizens and how levels of citizen agency, control and power can be increased. The steps proceed from "non-participation" to "citizen control".

8 Developed to empower and engage stakeholders in Agenda 2030, at four levels of engagement: inform, consult, involve and collaborate.
Understand the relations among gender equality, societal norms and institutional "rules"

The Gender at Work framework9 highlights different "spheres" that interact towards more or less inequality. Informal spheres are individual consciousness, capabilities and the social norms that pervade society; formal spheres include access to and distribution of resources for individuals and institutional "rules". To promote change and establish more equal power relations, all four spheres should be considered and action taken to influence how they interact. The framework can be used by both organizations and communities to find opportunities and barriers to V&ME of older people, to map a strategy for change and to guide evaluation to detect progress.

Secure change through accountability

Holding individuals or institutions accountable involves mobilizing the public, receiving external support and implementing political reforms. Having a voice is not sufficient for meaningful engagement; it requires policies for effective accountability, often referred to as "policies with teeth".

The "sandwich strategy' is a method of comparative research for understanding how combining public mobilization with policy reforms can counterbalance vested interests and improve accountability. The effectiveness of public and media pressure depends on formal accountability mechanisms and civic space for expressing demands and engaging in discussions with authorities.

Specific actions by stakeholders

**Member States** should review how older people are engaged in policy development on healthy ageing and related policies [health, care, employment] to ensure that policies reflect their rights and needs. Genuine engagement will mitigate any negative implications of ill-formed policies for diverse groups of older people and identify appropriate areas for investment and budget allocation [for example, in caregiver training or community initiatives]. Useful guidance and examples of good practice are available.10

Member States should integrate V&ME interventions into national commitments for fostering healthy ageing and achieving the SDGs. Member states might also consider initiating and supporting older people’s councils, assemblies or dialogues and other mechanisms that provide a space for dialogue with older people, ensure that their voices are heard, with feedback mechanisms and adequate long-term resources for sustainability. They should consider power dynamics and differentiate between "extractive" and

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9 Gender at work framework. Washington DC: Gender at Work; 2018 [https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/].


transformative engagement, which gives meaning to the voices of older people.

**UN agencies** should be role models in their practice and should mainstream V&ME in their work at all levels. For example, they could support the role of local, national and international nongovernmental organizations and civil society in facilitating V&ME and creating and/or strengthening suitable spaces. They could provide "neutral" facilitation to link civil society and local governments to co-produce solutions. They could invest in collecting evidence for programmes and policy development in both stable and fragile contexts and in low- and middle-income countries. Research can also be used to design guidelines and measurement frameworks for Member States. They can not only promote collaboration but also encourage and support institutionalization of mechanisms for V&ME of older people, invest in participatory methods and expertise, conduct research with older people, and solicit, capture and disseminate examples of V&ME activities in countries [using, for example, the VOICE section of the platform]. Many UN agencies have embraced an intergenerational approach to foster solidarity and equality, and they can provide examples and guidance on creating such connections across generations. As knowledge brokers and conveners, UN agencies can support the work of international nongovernmental organizations and academic institutions at the interface of policy and research and assess the impact on older people's empowerment and indicators of healthy ageing.

**Civil society groups** should advocate for older people to be at the front and centre of all engagements, ensure that proxy representation is scrutinized, and lobby for all government-led programmes and policy developments to include older people's voices and leadership. They can reach "hard to reach" groups and open and support spaces and opportunities for dialogue between older people, their representatives and other stakeholders on issues relevant to the Decade. Civil society can also ensure direct communication with governments and decision-makers and critically examine, challenge and keep records of the actions of government in response to V&ME advocacy developed with and on behalf of older people.

**Service providers** should find strategies to enable older people to choose services, to support them and to carefully document their journeys, feelings and needs as they receive services.

**Academia and think-tanks** should contribute further evidence on the implications of pursuing V&ME approaches, develop partnerships with Member States and civil society groups to document and research the application of different methods and tools to engagement of older persons in different contexts and dissemination of information from these process. They can also support in capacity building to enhance skills and knowledge on methods for voice and meaningful engagement. They could also highlight the "right to be heard" as part of a rights-based approach for older people and become stronger allies to civil society groups that advocate for a rights-based approach to healthy ageing in policies.

**The private sector** has potentially a significant role in demonstrating and advocating for the importance and benefits of "customer-centred" approaches to service and product development and evaluation. Private companies could
shift public perceptions about the ability of older people to be active socially and professionally. They can adapt their own hiring policies and advocate with governments for inclusive regulations for labour and social protection.

**Leaders of older people and older people themselves** have a major role to play through their collective power to voice their rights and needs and their ability to organize to be active in shaping multisectoral policies, systems and services that meet their needs and aspirations.

**Conclusion**

V&ME are fundamental to action and empowerment. They cannot be directed or controlled by a single entity. In the context of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, V&ME should involve a wide range of stakeholders, including Member States, UN agencies and other international organizations, civil society organizations, champions from the private sector, academia, employers and, most importantly, older individuals themselves.

To ensure a sustained movement, a rights-based approach must be adopted by establishing a robust legal framework and securing adequate funding to support initiatives.

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