

International Expert-Conference on Human Rights of older Persons

12-13 November 2018, Vienna

Human Rights, lifelong learning, digitalisation and education

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Before I begin, I would like to point out that while I am the Chair of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People, I am making this presentation in a personal capacity, not as an official statement of the Global Alliance. That being said, I would like to say a few words about the Global Alliance which, as you may know, is a network of over 227 members worldwide, united in our work to strengthen and promote the rights of older persons. Our mission is to support and enhance civil society engagement with Member States and National Human Rights Institutions at

national, regional and international levels around a convention on the rights of older persons. Most importantly, together we are striving to bring the voices of older people into the discussions that directly affect their lives. Without the insights of the day-to-day realities that older people experience, we risk undermining rather than strengthening our rights in later life.

I would like to congratulate the Austrian Government for taking the initiative to bring us together in this conference, and we hope it will strengthen commitment to the Open-Ended Working Group. This gathering is significant because it highlights the importance of working together and the need to make explicit that we remain rights holders as we get older. It is necessary for us to be explicit because, as we have seen, the lack of specificity under international human rights law is not sufficient to inform our laws and actions on how to realise our rights in later life.

It goes without saying that the starting point for my presentation is human rights. The indivisible nature of human rights means that a person, no matter what their age, should be treated with dignity, respect and equality in society. We are no less capable of pursuing dreams and ambitions, of contributing to our families and friends and the wider society because of our chronological age. But as we get older, our lives can be different. We are not treated the same by society due to ageism and age discrimination. We are told, and we believe ourselves, that we may be less capable. We do experience physical and sometimes mental changes which can affect how we participate in society. Yet we remain human. We remain equal in our right to fully enjoy every aspect of this life that we have been given.

This is the challenge and the paradox that runs through every aspect of our discussions about protecting the rights of older persons – how to secure our dignity as human beings on the one hand, and the need for protection when we are vulnerable on the other. This came through clearly in the discussion yesterday about how we define older age and the need for creating legal certainty within a new instrument. We must not allow our desire to protect against vulnerability to undermine in anyway our inherent dignity – our equal status as rights holders.

But I am here to talk about lifelong learning, digitalisation and education.

Key points

- What the right to education and lifelong learning means in later life
- Putting digitalisation and lifelong learning into context globally
- Some normative lessons

I am going to take us back to basics and look at some of the human rights language that underpins this discussion. I would like to remind us why we are discussing the right to education and lifelong learning, and in that respect put digitalisation in a wider context. In the rest of my presentation, I will try to cover three main points: What the right to education and lifelong learning means in later life; putting digitalisation and lifelong learning into context globally; and some normative lessons that we can draw on from the right to education more generally.

Education and lifelong learning are firmly established as human rights and the references are too numerous to list here. I will call attention, however, to a few lines from General Comment No. 13 on the right to education, submitted to the Economic and Social Council. This is a document that developed more fully the content on what the right to education means:

“Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realising other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalised adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities.”

Economic and Social Council General Comment No. 13
E/C.12/1999/8 December 1999

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General Comment 13 goes on to state:

“The importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, is one of the joys and rewards of human existence.”

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There can be no doubting the significance and importance of education and lifelong learning. It can be seen as part of the bedrock of what makes us human, what gives us voice, what enables us to participate more fully in society. General Comment 13 helpfully goes on to make specific reference to older people in the context of fundamental education:

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“Fundamental education includes the elements of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability which are common to education in all its forms and at all levels.”

Economic and Social Council General Comment No. 13
E/C.12/1999/8 December 1999

“Fundamental education includes the elements of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability which are common to education in all its forms and at all levels.”

I am going to come back to this point later. Crucially, the Comment goes on to say:

“Enjoyment of the right to fundamental education is not limited by age or gender; it extends to children, youth and adults, including older persons.”

Economic and Social Council General Comment No. 13
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The question we need to be asking in this respect is: why isn't this specificity informing our approach to education internationally as fully as it should be.

Lifelong learning too, is well established as a right and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education helpfully wrote a report in 2016 that provides extensive analysis. I share with you one simple passage that might be helpful in our understanding of how this right should be applied:

“Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages in all life-wide contexts through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) that together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands.”

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education
Right to education, Note by the Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly
A/71/358
29 August 2016

“Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages in all life-wide contexts through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) that together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands.”

The key point to emphasise here, especially in the context of our discussion of digitalisation, is the need for using a variety of modalities.

UNESCO and the ILO have done considerable work in the area of lifelong learning and it has been helpfully incorporated into the Sustainable Development Goals. I expect some of my colleagues on the panel will be able to provide specific insights into how the protection of the right to education and lifelong learning can be achieved for older persons.

So, we should be in no doubt that there is a rich seam of normative content to draw from.

I do wish to emphasise, however, that the extent to which these rights are realised for older persons depends first and foremost on older persons being perceived as equal members of society, as being capable, as being economically active, as having the potential for learning and continuous self-actualisation. Until we firmly and clearly articulate this for all to see in society, no form of technology will be able to help realise these rights.

So, what role does digital technology have to play? First, it is important that we take a reality check on where we are with regards to the adoption of these technologies. There is no doubt that this is the future, but where are we at present? We have touched on some of this yesterday already.

We are all familiar with the demographics of population ageing, but it is worth reminding ourselves of two key facts:

Firstly, two thirds of the world’s older people today live in lower- and middle-income countries – and this will increase substantially in the years to come.

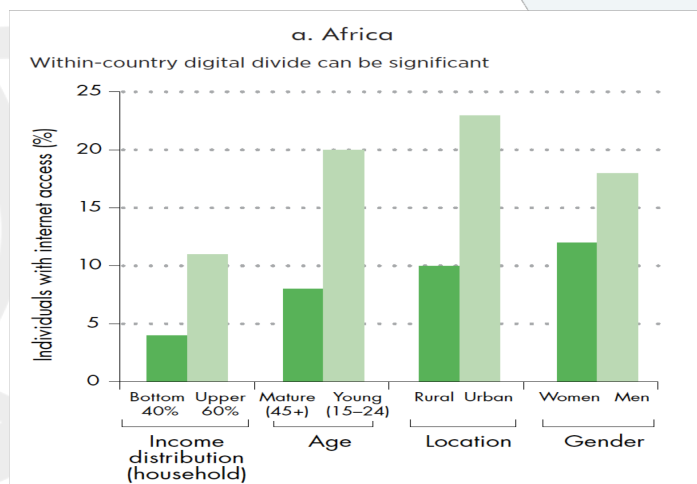
Secondly, gross inequality exists in the world today, both between and within countries.

Divides persist between and within countries—in access and capability

- 6 BILLION without BROADBAND
- 4 BILLION without INTERNET
- 2 BILLION without MOBILE PHONES
- 0.4 BILLION without A DIGITAL SIGNAL

SOURCE: WDR 2016 team based on Research ICT Africa and ITU data

The World Bank helpfully did a World Report on digitalisation in 2016. As you can see, according to their figures, access to digital technology is still far out of reach for a large proportion of the world's population.



Sources: WDR 2016 team, based on data from Research ICT Africa (various years), ITU, and Eurostat (EC, various years)

And when we look at the detail of who has access, as illustrated by this focus on Africa, we can see huge inequalities by age, gender, location and wealth. And I would like to point out that we need greater detail in the data beyond 45 plus.

Even in a country with advanced digital integration such as the UK, according to the UK Government's own national statistics:

- 3.8 million people aged 65 and over have never used the internet.
- Almost a quarter of people aged 65 to 74 and around three-fifths of people aged over 75 have not used the internet in the last 3 months.

I mention this because underpinning the technology are fundamentals, that we cannot escape and that we have to take into account when considering how digitalisation can contribute to the realisation of the right to education and lifelong learning.

The slide features a light blue background with a large, faint circular graphic on the left. At the top left, the logo of the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection is displayed. At the top right, the logo for ICHROP (International Commission on Human Rights of Older Persons) is shown, including the website 'sozialministerium.at'. The main title is centered in a large, bold, black font. Below the title, a bulleted list of four key areas is presented. At the bottom, the reference to Economic and Social Council General Comment No. 13 is provided, along with the date and location of the conference.

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Normative Content of Article 13 – Right to Education – Right to Digitalisation?

- Availability
- Accessibility
- Acceptability
- Adaptability

Economic and Social Council General Comment No. 13
E/C.12/1999/8 December 1999

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Going back to General Comment 13 on the right to education, it outlines normative content in four key areas that we must bear in mind when looking at how digitalisation contributes to realising the rights of older persons. Let's look briefly at each of these:

- Availability
 - Is access to the internet and broadband available in sufficient quantity?

We have seen already that it isn't for the majority of the world's older people. We must be careful that we do not exacerbate inequalities in our society at the same time as seeking to make better use of new technologies.

- Accessibility
 - Underpinning this are three areas of accessibility:
 - Non-discrimination – not being denied access
 - Physical accessibility
 - Economic accessibility

The starting point for any discussion of lifelong learning must be an acceptance that older people can and should learn. Ageism means that this is far from the reality. The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities has meant that we are beginning to take some strides forward in making digital technology accessible to the visual and hearing impaired. Mobile telephony has meant that technology can be brought to where older people live, even in resource poor settings, who may not have access to other services. This assumes of course access to sufficient support and the financial means being available to use this technology.

- Acceptability
 - Form, substance & teaching methods

We are all keenly aware that simply having access to the internet and digital technology does not mean having access to content and educational material that is correct or culturally acceptable. Access to technology must be accompanied by appropriate good quality educational content, training, tools and pedagogical support that enable older adult learners to benefit fully.

- Adaptability
 - Is the technology flexible for the changing needs of society?

These are the known unknowns. We can see innovations taking place across many parts of the globe, including the use of digital technology in resource poor settings. But we must look beyond the technology that we can see today. Where the human rights of future generations are concerned, we must put in place fundamental standards for the rights of older persons that enables us to accommodate new forms of learning and technology that have not yet been introduced.

In conclusion

- Digitalisation has the power to marginalise as well as empower
- Clarity in human rights standards is necessary
- Technology must be underpinned by human rights fundamentals

In closing, I would like us to be mindful of the following:

- The potential for digitalisation to marginalise parts of the population, especially the current and next generations of older people, as well as empowering them.
- Clarity in human rights standards is necessary to articulate how lifelong learning should be applied and realised for people in later life
- Technology as a means for realising human rights is only as effective as the fundamentals underpinning it

We live in a time of enormous potential and exciting possibilities. But the risk is as great as the reward. To mitigate against this, the answer is simple: we need clearly articulated, universal, binding human rights standards that inform governments and civil society alike on what human rights protection means for people in later life.

Thank you.