

Rights, Challenges, and Solutions for Older Persons

Social disadvantage due to COVID-19

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Social disadvantages in older age

- Frequently a result of multiple intersecting factors
- Frequently a result of lifelong disadvantages
- Long-term care is one way of mitigating disadvantages by providing consistent, targeted set of services that address disadvantages and support independent living

The importance of intersectional approach to social disadvantages

- Intersectionality explores interactions and multiplying effects of inequalities for an individual
- For older persons, there are several intersecting factors that may add to their social disadvantage:
 - Geographical placement (living in rural or remote areas)
 - Poverty/ Income security
 - Insufficient access to essential services
 - Loneliness
 - Deteriorating health/ inadequate access to healthcare
 - Social exclusion (including slower adoption of digital information and communication technology)

The importance of life-course approach to social disadvantages

- Similarly to health in older age, that is a result of different health conditions over a lifetime, social disadvantages also accumulate over a lifetime
- For example, increasingly more older persons live in poverty in both developed and developing countries as a result of income insecurity over a life course
- Other life course factors include discrimination, access to health and care services, mobility
- Research shows that lifetime disadvantages and inequality are linked to heightened health risks including cardiovascular conditions, diabetes as well as COVID-19 infection.

COVID-19 pandemic effects

- The COVID-19 pandemic made obvious many gaps in accessibility of human rights for older persons
- The already existing disadvantages and related inequalities were reinforced during the pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic effects

- Research showed
 - Pandemic response movement restrictions were particularly difficult for older persons without support from family or neighbours
 - Lockdown, isolation and general insecurity increased the risks of mental health problems for older persons, particularly the ones with pre-existing conditions
 - Access to healthcare services unrelated to COVID-19, including therapy and health check-ups was severely reduced which particularly had an effect on the health of older persons with chronic conditions

Post COVID-19 world

- Changed circumstances for older persons include:
 - Untreated chronic conditions and fewer regular health exams during pandemic increase health risks for older persons and their health-related expenses
 - Inflation and increase in prices of goods and services including long-term care services
 - Reduced number of available formal caregivers due to them migrating to Western Europe in search of better pay

Post COVID-19 world

- Changed circumstances for older persons include (continued):
 - Longer wait for the long-term care services and higher out of pocket costs for care and treatments
 - Lowered capacity of informal caregivers due to their own struggle with inflation, price increases and job insecurity

Western Balkans regional research on access to long-term care post-COVID-19

- National and regional research on accessibility of long-term care: „Long-term Care of Older Persons and Persons With Disabilities in the Western Balkans “
- Five Western Balkans Countries
- Supported by European Union and Austrian Development Agency as part of the regional project „Strengthening resilience of older persons and persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis and future crises “

Research findings

- During the pandemic the services of long-term care, essential for independent living of older persons were severely affected across the region:
 - Healthcare systems were overwhelmed with COVID-19 so other services were severely reduced or unavailable – especially affecting older persons needing regular checkups or therapy
 - Social welfare services in the community were initially interrupted or reduced due to lack of protocols for emergencies
 - Informal caregivers faced steep challenges (curfews, infection risks, reduced income...)

Research findings

- Structural common issues:
 - Fragmentation of services through different systems (healthcare, social welfare, pension insurance)
 - In Serbia the services are accessed through systems of healthcare, social welfare and pension and disability insurance
 - In Albania services are defined through legislation related to healthcare, social welfare and social insurance
 - In Bosnia and Herzegovina, services are accessed through systems of health care and social welfare
 - In Montenegro services are accessed through systems of social welfare and health care
 - In North Macedonia services are accessed through systems of social welfare and health care

Research findings

- Structural common issues (continued):
 - None of the countries uses the term „long-term care“ in its legislation
 - No joint planning on delivery of services between different systems – healthcare, social welfare etc.
 - The systems do not exchange important data on beneficiaries
 - No single entry point for beneficiaries for all long-term care services

Research findings

- Structural common issues (continued):
 - Limited scope and variety of services
 - Insufficient capacity of services
 - Caregiver workforce has skills-gap and is migrating outside of the region, responding to increased need for care in Western Europe

Research findings

- Structural common issues (continued):
 - Informal caregivers are under-recognized, untrained, unsupported and experience burnout risk. Many informal caregivers also migrate outside of the region looking for work.
 - Under-regulated private market of services
 - Data collection and analysis need to be improved

Recommendations

- Working on integration of services into one integrated system of long-term care with better communication inside the system and single entry point for users
- Better funding for long-term care services

Recommendations

- Better funded LTC systems will address the burning issues through
 - Increasing the variety of services
 - Improving the accessibility of services, especially in remote and rural areas
 - Better support of informal caregivers

Recommendations

- Better data collection, processing and sharing when it comes to needs for LTC and capacities in the community to provide it
- Putting digital information and communication technology to better use, especially for remote and rural areas

A new UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons

- A convention on the rights of older persons would highlight all relevant rights in one place
- This would enhance accessibility and understanding, as the CRPD did for persons with disabilities.
- The convention would provide guidance for policy makers developing LTC policies as well as for care practitioners in their daily work



Thank you for your attention!

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