



ASPIRE – Active Ageing through Social Partnership and Industrial Relations in Europe *

Active ageing, what does paid work have to do with it?

by Mariano Sánchez & Pilar Díaz

In 2002 the World Health Organization (WHO) released its document *Active Ageing. A Policy Framework* as a contribution to the Second United Nations World Assembly on Ageing. **The WHO argued that promoting active ageing was a condition for countries to get old and invited them to act.** WHO's idea of active ageing embraced a “life course perspective” and it was—so the WHO said—based on rights, needs, preferences and capacities of older people. Why the need to bring forward this *new* ageing concept? The so-called “demographic revolution” was facing us with a challenge requiring this move. And how was the WHO's active ageing concept understood, after all? Literally, “active ageing is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age”. According to the WHO, “if ageing is to be a positive experience, longer life must be accompanied by continuing opportunities for health, participation and security”. Clear enough!

The same year, the Council of the European Union undertook examination of a report from the Commission and the Council on increasing labour-force participation and promoting active ageing. **On the one hand active ageing was introduced as an important contribution to improve people's well-being. On the other hand, it was deemed to be an instrument to raise older people's participation in employment, a way for them to remain active as they grow older.** Keeping older workers in work was viewed as beneficial for employees, employers, and for the economy and society as a whole. Why this pairing of **ageing well** and **working longer**? The report explained how older workers' health status was the most important determinant of their labour market transitions. If active ageing was about healthy ageing, then it did make sense to support the former so that the latter might give people the chance to extend their working lives.

Sixteen years have passed since the publication of these two reports and much has been discussed so far around the meaning of active ageing. For instance, last March **European representatives of employers and trade unions signed a framework agreement on active ageing “to make it easier for older workers to actively participate and stay in the labour market until the legal retirement age”**, while they can be valued as important irrespective of their age. In line with the original WHO's optimisation approach, this new framework agreement considers active ageing to be about “optimising opportunities for workers of all ages to work in good quality, productive and healthy conditions until legal retirement age, based on mutual commitment and motivation of employers and workers”. In the end, the gist of active ageing is the aim of fostering healthy and productive working lives in a life course perspective. **Being active** and **being productive** stand out as two connected aspects in this discussion. The understanding of activity seems to be biased towards productive activities, within which working longer is a good representative.

To wrap up, we might say that active ageing has developed through a divergent path. On one side, there is the *comprehensive and multidimensional* WHO's normative approach emphasizing a combination of security, health, life-long learning, and participation—not necessarily in the labour market—as the idealistic framework to provide good ageing opportunities for older people — unfortunately, the initial life-course approach has been mostly restricted to paying attention to people 60+. On the other side, we find a *narrower and instrumental* view on active ageing and working lives as cultivated by the European Union: enabling women and men to remain longer in employment is the first of three main characteristics of active ageing—the other two being to harness the contribution that older women and men can make to society, and to keep people in good health as they grow older. That said, the WHO and EU instances share two basic principles: (i) they use active ageing bottom-down as an ideal and normative institutional model not to be discussed but just followed, and (ii) they both deem the individual's autonomy and independence throughout life as key features to age well.

The [ASPIRE project](#) has just produced a series of reports on active ageing through social partnership and industrial relations in Europe. **These reports confirm as well the existence of different and sometimes contradictory understandings of active ageing both between and within countries.** For instance, in Italy active ageing policies are mainly about getting the right balance between businesses' productivity/efficiency and older people's wellbeing/happiness at the workplace and elsewhere. In the UK, while the current idea of 'Fuller Working Lives' seems to imply a more holistic commitment to active ageing, in reality the programme is largely centred around the necessity to encourage people to remain in the workforce up to and beyond what were the normal ages of exit. There has been a reluctance in the UK Government to link all of the elements of what might be recognised as “active ageing agenda” together in a coherent whole across public policy. In the case of Spain, the WHO's approach was strongly supported since the country's commitment to host the 2nd UN World Assembly on Ageing in 2002. Therefore, active ageing comes up as mix of policy areas—with a prominent health and social accent—mainly addressed to enhance wellbeing of older retirees. Consequently, the discourse on active ageing and work is still underdeveloped in the country, especially in a context of a very high unemployment rate for all population. In Poland, like in Spain, the discourse on active ageing is also underdeveloped: currently, there is no general awareness and knowledge about active ageing in the country, nor ability to apply specific solutions to ageing issues at the organizational level. The important step towards a systemic solution in building an active and healthy society including the older population was the Polish government's programme “Solidarity between generations. Measures aimed at increasing the economic activity of people over 50”, implemented from 2008. In public opinion, the ageing of the Polish society is noticeable, and entrepreneurs often report lack of workforce because of the ageing of population. All of this gives opportunities to develop policies and implement solutions for the Polish economy.

All in all, a diversity of active ageing conceptualizations is the case. Not a problem! However, we should keep in mind that promoting active ageing may mean different things in different contexts. In this regard, an old note of caution in the words of the UK researcher Alan Walker in 2006 fits in here very well: “At the present time active ageing does not amount to a coherent strategy and is sometimes just a political slogan used to cover anything that seems to fit under it”. Have representations and discourses on active ageing in the EU changed in the last 12 years to discard this note? It doesn't seem so. Beyond active ageing's diversity of meanings, is extended paid work becoming a fundamental goal of active ageing? It does seem so.

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