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Guest Editorial



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Population ageing is one of the major global phenomena of the 21st century. Despite the great achievements of improved longevity that all human beings have dreamed of, we are faced with the challenging situation of needing to advance a sustainable future with an ageing population, while having to address the heavy burden imposed on societies, based on irrational assumptions on ageing per se and older people. Presently most societies worry about the social burden arising from the social exclusion of older people from mainstream society and the need to provide them with social welfare provisions.

Human life can be seen as exchange resources among individuals and/or social institutions. Imbalanced exchanges may result in imbalanced power relationships. Those with less power may fall into disadvantaged situations, such as poverty, social exclusion or unemployment as a result. Empowerment aims to make power more balanced through increasing and/or improving resources.

Older persons have fewer chances to make their resources superior, due to social forces, such as ageism, irrational social discrimination and institutionalised social exclusion (such as mandatory retirement systems), and negative perceptions. Therefore it would be expedient to balance power relationships between individuals and/or social institutions by helping older people improve existing resources, increase resources or acquire new resources. Ageism and negative perceptions of the ageing society built upon prejudice and non-scientific assumptions seem to have reinforced the image of older people as powerless. The social welfare perspective of supporting and caring for older people after their exclusion from mainstream society, which has been the main social institutional arrangement in advanced welfare states, has serious limitations in integrating older people into society and thus building a sustainable ageing society.

One effective and desirable way to integrate older persons into society and thus to develop sustainable ageing societies, is to empower older people so that they improve resources or acquire new resources in intellectual, health, socioeconomic, psychological and political aspects.

The social welfare system for older people is no longer an effective and efficient model to resolve problems associated with individual and population ageing, because of the increasing economic burden borne by society. An ageing society is generally feared by governments, because of its perceived increasing burden to society. However, this is an assumption based upon widespread negative perceptions of ageing and older people that disregards the increasing body of scientific evidence that shows that older persons can develop their capacities, even well into advanced old age. The social and legal system of retirement demarcated only by chronological age derives from these negative perceptions and in turn reinforces them. Capacity-building and empowerment for both ageing and aged people has been shown by growing evidence to be possible. Along with the need to reform social welfare programmes, it is essential to plan for capacitybuilding of older people and their consequent mainstreaming into an ageing society. Without embracing the potential of the ageing population as a basis for future development through empowerment, it will be far more difficult for society to bear the economic burden arising from individual and population ageing.

An ageing society with empowered ageing people could be developed into a sustainable future in which all ages have the means to better themselves and to contribute to the betterment of society according to their capacities. This future ageing society would be totally inclusive, and its development would mark a new milestone in the progress of society.

In conclusion, we at IAGG strongly believe that the sustainable development of an ageing society depends upon the empowerment of ageing and older people through systematic education and training.

