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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving
poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and
decent work for all**

Statement submitted by AARP, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

AARP is a non-profit, non-partisan organization with a membership of more than 37 million that helps people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthens communities and fights for the issues that matter most to families, such as health care, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities and protection from financial abuse.

AARP has collaborated with the United Nations for nearly 40 years by participating in major conferences and helping to forge an international constituency on ageing. Since its founding in 1958, AARP has served as a key source of global information and advocacy on issues affecting ageing populations and has strengthened the network of advocates who believe that everyone should age with dignity and purpose.

AARP is honoured to be participating in the fifty-second session of the Commission on Social Development and commends the United Nations on previous initiatives it has undertaken to embed ageing in development planning.

We are now in the second decade of what is being called the “century of ageing”, the dimensions of which are well known. Among the most daunting projections are these: by 2045, for the first time in history, the global population of people aged 60 and higher will exceed the number of children. By 2050, one in five people in developing countries will be over the age of 60.

Globally, of all the people who ever lived to age 65 since the dawn of humankind, two thirds are walking the earth today. Major thresholds are being crossed and this has uncertain consequences for development.

As these demographic shifts re-engineer contexts of social security around the world, the capacity of governments to provide fundamental quality of life for hundreds of millions of older citizens will be tested. Social compacts will need to be recalibrated and support systems transformed to meet the needs of the ageing. For AARP, these shifts raise questions about *how* older people will live: Will their communities be “livable”? Will they have access to the health care they need? How financially secure will they be?

Many see ageing as a development issue that does not require much attention. For AARP, it is anything but. It is, rather, one of the most strategically important issues the world has ever seen. Global ageing demands our attention — and our investment. It begins with changing the way societies think about being over the age of 50.

It is now conventional wisdom that the disposition of older people in all societies is intertwined with the crafting of strategies for social equity, health and economic growth — three key pillars of development. At AARP, we believe it is equally important to frame longevity as an achievement, not a problem. Doing so opens up greater possibilities for the kind of policy innovation necessary to install these pillars for everyone, everywhere.

AARP is optimistic. We have always viewed ageing as an opportunity to tap the wisdom and value of older people in ways that improve society for all by supporting policy interventions that, for example, (a) encourage ageing in place in livable communities that offer affordable housing, accessible services and adequate

mobility choices; (b) empower individuals to be informed health-care consumers; and (c) enable older people to work longer, thereby adding dynamism to employment markets.

Stigma and discrimination against the elderly persist and impede true social inclusion, however. Poor governance in so many countries perpetuates barriers that deny older people access to vital services and violate basic human rights. Wrenching poverty continues to imprison millions, effectively cutting them off from any meaningful engagement in public life.

The ongoing challenge is to tear down barriers, safeguard rights and create positive development settings for older people everywhere. This will entail focusing minds on the scenario playing out in many countries, namely, rapidly ageing populations, improved life expectancy, health-care challenges and financial uncertainty. The development “lens” that we use to respond to this scenario is critical.

Uppermost in our thinking is that ageing is an opportunity. This lens sees engagement in development as age- and ability-neutral. It sees development as a means of enlarging possibilities for all. It expects that the next development framework should adopt this life course approach.

So for us, nobody, including older people and other marginalized groups, should be left behind. Ageing must be embedded in the post-2015 development agenda. Older people are a wellspring of skills, wisdom and experience. In so many ways, they are potential assets to sustainable development interventions.

Social integration flows from making communities livable for all. In order for people over the age of 50 to maintain their independence, remain involved in their communities and enjoy quality of life as they age, they must have choices for mobility, housing, employment and supportive services.

If they do, they will make more trips outside their homes, they will stay connected to their friends, they will be more engaged in life and they will pursue healthier, more balanced lifestyles. People over the age of 50 want their communities to be livable because they want to remain in them.

There is global relevance to this idea. Around the world, governments and the private sector are responding to this basic desire for livability, and to the demographic trends that are creating an imperative for livable communities, with innovation and fresh thinking. In many countries, livable community markets are forming — in housing, technology, transportation and services — where none existed before.

The contributions of older people to communities bear witness to the power of strong, intergenerational relationships. So many grandparents, for instance, are the rock, the heart and the soul of villages across the planet. For them, raising orphaned grandchildren is about preserving a community-centred way of life and providing a measure of familiarity, safety and hope — things that allow children to blossom.

The larger truth is that generations are linked more closely than ever before. Each generation tries to help the one that follows. This interdependence lasts a lifetime. This is a notion that transcends the things that divide peoples, nations and governments and forms the basis of social integration everywhere.

Gandhi once admonished us to recall the face of the poorest and weakest person we have seen, and ask ourselves if the step we contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Where this idea takes us is to the stubborn reality of inequality, the reality that hundreds of millions of people are left behind.

We can no longer pay lip service to disparities, to inequality. Inequality, in any context, suggests unequal access to opportunity. In a universal sense, development is meant to be the antidote to inequality. Development is precisely about opening opportunity to everyone. The next development framework must restore credibility to the notion that development lifts all boats.

It is unacceptable that, as Kevin Watkins of the Overseas Development Institute writes, being born to a household in much of Africa elevates the risk of early death by a factor of five and being a poor rural girl in Pakistan more than triples the risk of being out of school. The clear focus should be on narrowing disparities through the life course in education, health and opportunities, regardless of circumstances, age, race, disability or gender.

This focus calls on leaders to promote policy architecture that spurs inclusive economic growth in sectors with high concentrations of marginalized people, generates jobs with higher productivity that accommodate older workers and accelerates the emergence of a global marketplace for people over the age of 50.

More broadly, in seeking to eradicate extreme poverty, we must set our sights on breaking the two-way link between poverty and ageing, in which precarious living conditions lead to the exclusion of older people from community life.

Good health helps older people lead full, productive lives into their seventies, eighties and nineties. It helps foster enduring intergenerational relationships that are often the difference between life and death, especially in places where kids are orphaned by AIDS, employment, migration and other circumstances. That said, ageing populations create daunting new health realities.

Globally, nearly 63 million people over the age of 60 suffer from hearing loss, and a staggering two thirds of them live in developing countries. 120 million people aged 60 and higher have a visual impairment, and three quarters of them live in developing countries. In addition, nearly 80 per cent of deaths from non-infectious diseases occur in low- and middle-income countries. Age-related health problems, including chronic illnesses such as heart disease, arthritis and stroke, disproportionately affect older people in poorer countries because of a lack of prevention and poor access to treatment.

Developing countries struggle with how to manage a rise in diseases such as cancer or diabetes, with which they have little experience. Financing is often unavailable for preventive measures such as regular physical examinations, eye exams or information campaigns on healthy eating and exercise. In the end, planning for healthy ageing falls by the wayside.

Health-care leaders in countries that are preparing for ageing populations need to do more than just react. They need to foster healthy ageing cultures where initiatives are in place that prevent and mitigate disease, enabling older people to remain mobile and independent in their communities. If we are to reap the benefits of living longer, we must invest in healthy ageing and shape our institutions to better suit the needs of an ageing society.

Now that major demographic shifts are in motion, calls have been made for more age-disaggregated data. Access to such data, however, continues to be a systemic problem. In many countries, the lack of data is so abysmal that basic identification documentation to access entitlements and social protections is unobtainable.

We are living in digital times, however, where the volume and quality of data has improved by an order of magnitude. Identifying who is being left behind, and why, is where we start. Policymakers need access to data that can literally change lives. Access to data can help a policymaker strengthen the case for public spending, add evidence-based information in support of a policy pathway or lay out facts for public consumption.

The data revolution reminds us that the “global commons” remains a way for countries to learn from each other. This lies at the heart of the international work of AARP: everybody wins when new insights and new approaches to similar challenges are shared.

AARP frames longevity as an achievement and an opportunity, not a problem. We understand full well, though, that the contexts in which ageing is addressed differ starkly. In some developing countries, the challenges can be immense because social policy infrastructures are inadequate or non-existent. Even so, much can be learned from all societies in how they conceptualize ageing issues and care for older people.

So, while ageing is a global development issue, our opportunities for progress are local and can be found in communities. The task ahead is to revisit the vision of what we want our communities to look like and plan for it with a more hopeful view of what it means to age.

Governments have much to do at a time when population ageing is having an impact on the ways societies provide for their citizens. AARP encourages the Commission to promote a post-2015 development agenda that is inclusive and empowering.

In the end, we have to ask ourselves: what kind of world do we want? For AARP the answer is clear: we want a world in which everyone lives with dignity — a life with access to affordable, quality health care and the opportunity to achieve lifelong financial security, and a life where everyone has a realistic chance to pursue and achieve their dream whether they are young or old.

AARP congratulates the Commission for organizing the present session and encourages all participants to seek outcomes that advance all previous agreements.
