

*Opening of the meeting. Remarks by Sergei Zelenev, Chief, Social  
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Distinguished colleagues, good morning.

It is a pleasure for me to be here today with you to address the issue that has become truly emblematic—A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. I sincerely thank the Government of Brazil for the invitation, and express my hope that we will achieve a positive outcome.

I do not have a magic crystal ball and do not know if the international community at large is ready for such a Convention or will eventually adopt it. But the fact itself that we are discussing this most important issue at such a representative international gathering overwhelms me; from that standpoint this meeting is an achievement in itself. It reflects the forward-looking nature of the commitments in the Brasilia Declaration adopted at the Second Regional Intergovernmental Conference on Ageing in Latin America and the Caribbean on 6 December 2007 with the path breaking proposals “that legal frameworks and monitoring mechanisms be created to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of older persons, whether they live in long-stay facilities or in their own homes, and to facilitate the formulation

and enforcement of laws and programmes for the prevention of abuse, abandonment, neglect, ill-treatment and violence against older persons” (para. 13). The participating Governments further pledged to organize the necessary consultations with Governments in the region “to promote the drafting of a convention on the rights of older persons within the framework of the United Nations”. So, all of us have come here to Rio to start this important process.

I think many of us feel very emotional now. But emotions-- while humane and understandable-- are not enough: moving forward on an issue like this, to get such a Convention, requires the right combination of heart and mind-- to create such a legal document we must convince those who are still undecided, putting forward arguments that are solid and compelling.

The Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing adopted in 2002 makes many references to the rights of older persons. Let me quote para. 13 that says: “The promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, is essential for the creation of an inclusive society for all ages in which older persons participate fully and without discrimination and on the basis of equality.”

But we all know that the Madrid Plan is not a legally binding document.

We at DESA have just completed the review and appraisal exercise of the Madrid Plan done through 2007-2008. It revealed many achievements at the national level, but also numerous problems. Many older persons around the world are without adequate social protection and health care, and their security, including income and food security, is not guaranteed. Many remain excluded from society in a most basic sense, being discriminated against, neglected or sometimes abused. This situation cries for action and the role of the State is indispensable in this context. But Governments alone cannot do much without collaborating with other stakeholders, and most important, partnerships with civil society.

MIPAA played a truly catalytic role in meeting the challenges of ageing—the development dimension of ageing and the life-course approach to the ageing process were social policy innovations when the MIPAA framework was conceptualized. It brought increased awareness on ageing issues, not only in theory but in practice as well—practical response has been visible in developing new laws, policies and programs. Governments are becoming

more conscious of the importance of the rights of older persons, and solidarity between the generations.

There are some other recent positive examples regarding rights-based approaches to socio-demographic groups: the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted in June 2006 by the Human Rights Council and by the General Assembly in September 2007. This Declaration represents a culmination of over twenty years of work (the drafting process began in 1985.)

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was the fastest negotiated human rights instrument in the history of the UN. It is important now, as we contemplate a new Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, to understand its success and lessons, and to understand what made State parties act so fast.

We need to learn a lot. For instance, how to use a rights-based approach in framing public policy on ageing. The civil, political, economic and cultural rights enshrined in the respective Covenant represent a formative framework for development. Indivisibility of all human rights has been acknowledged. This overarching approach may alter the institutional logic at the national

level where laws are adopted. In this context not only people, and older persons in particular, have needs but also they have entitlements derived from their rights. This approach defines the obligation the State must assume regarding older persons. The role of the State has to change to be more proactive and supportive. A rights-based approach could help those who are excluded, promoting a “society for all” as called for by the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen.

I think there is an agreement that we are at the beginning of a long road. But the process itself when the Convention and rights of older persons are widely discussed is hugely important for society at large. The discussions of experts, representatives of Governments and civil society organizations may shed further light on the crucial role played by older persons in society as well as improve their well-being and inclusion. Let us hope that we avoid as many bumps as possible on this long road and eventually reduce the vulnerability and strengthen independence and security of millions of older persons who deserve the admiration and full support of society.

Thank you.