Gastbeitrag: Active Ageing Index: A legacy of the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations

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Measuring the active ageing of older people in Europe

Advances in health and social welfare in the 20th century have been a victim of their own success: the success in longevity gains and ageing populations implies great pressures on resources, particularly for pensions and healthcare. For example, someone born in London today could expect to live 30 years longer than a counterpart in 1900, will have requirements for pensions as well healthcare provisions during this much longer period of later life.

The clouds are not all dark with foreboding! Longevity gains have also accompanied economic progress in most societies. In addition, technological advances are promoting effective and efficient provision of healthcare, albeit the progress has been gradual and uneven.

Most remarkably, we overlook the idea that the new generation of older people are a powerful resource for their families, communities and economies, provided they live in enabling, age-friendly environments. Being healthier as a group, older people have the potential to contribute to not just their own wellbeing but also to sustain a greater economic and social prosperity for the society as a whole (see e.g. Foster and Walker 2015). The aspirations towards better and more comprehensive pensions, health and social care have also become a norm for this generation. And all of this is what we mean by new paradigms of active ageing.

Active ageing means growing older in good health and as a full member of society, feeling more fulfilled in jobs and in social engagements, more independent in our daily lives and more engaged as citizens. The active ageing strategies are in fact about changing attitudes and developing a more positive approach to tackling the challenges of ageing. But this change cannot happen successfully without help from governments and relevant agencies, at national as well as at local communities' levels.

For example, active and healthy ageing cannot happen without help from governments at national and community level. The key goal of active ageing strategies is to facilitate an environment that is rich in opportunities where old age is not synonymous with becoming dependent on others. The Active Ageing Index measures active and healthy ageing outcomes and untapped potential of older people. It is a complementary tool to the Global AgeWatch Index of HelpAge International which measures older people's wellbeing (HelpAge International 2013).

The Active Ageing Index (AAI) provides insights into what different aspects of active and healthy ageing can be enhanced with effective public policies and programmes in different European countries. By benchmarking country performances, the AAI evidence encourages governments to look at policies and programmes that other countries have adopted and learn from those experiences (for the latest results, see UNECE / European Commission 2014; for the first results, see Zaidi 2013).

What is the Active Ageing Index?

The Active Ageing Index has been developed for the European Union countries during the year 2012, which was the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. The research work was undertaken at the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Re-

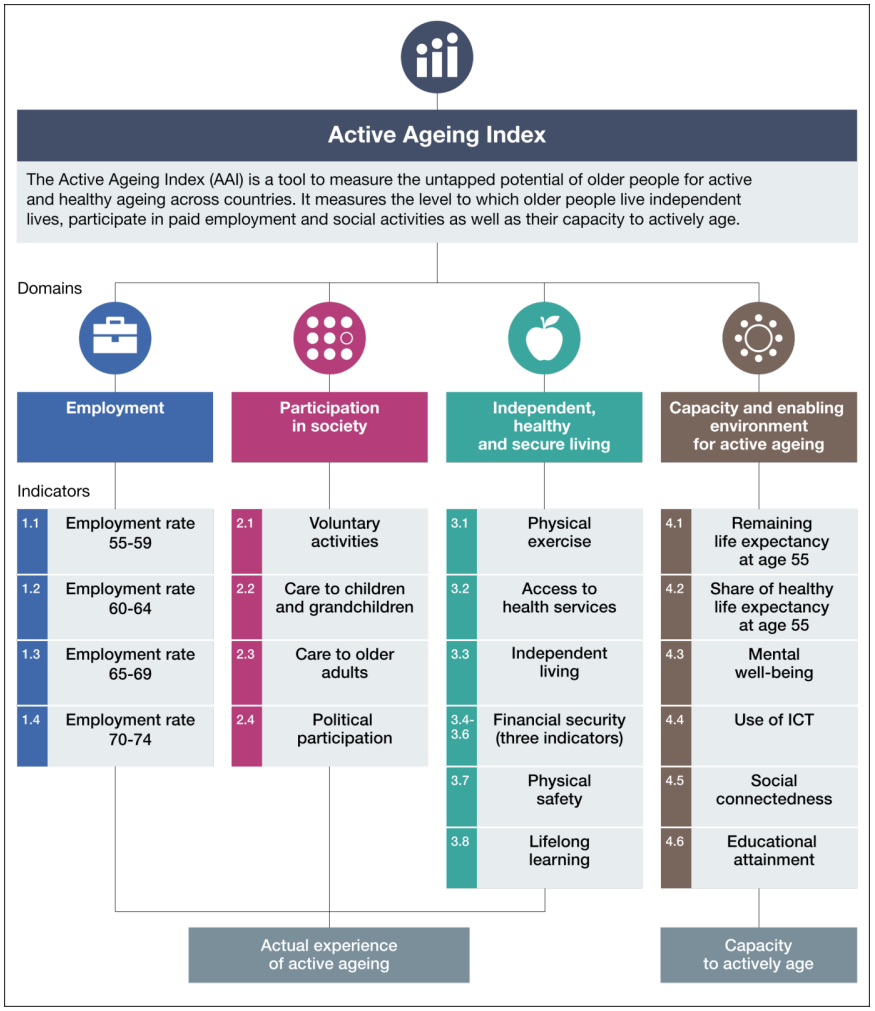

Figure 1: The domains and indicators of the Active Ageing Index
(Source: UNECE & European Commission (2015), p. 13)

search, Vienna, and it is currently undertaken at Centre for Research on Ageing, University of Southampton. The AAI project was initiated by the European Commission with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe joining it at its early stages.

Composite indices such as the AAI always raise difficult methodological issues, e.g. of weighting their constituent indicators (see also HelpAge International 2013). In this respect, the development of the AAI benefited enormously from the consultations of members of the AAI Expert Group, comprising academics, statisticians and representatives of international organisations such as OECD, European Commission and UNECE.

The AAI assesses the untapped potential among older people across multiple dimensions of active and healthy ageing. It is a tool that monitors overall progress and identifies where challenges remain across European countries. It also helps in assessing where policies have started to ensure that older people enjoy an active and healthy life.

The AAI encourages policy-makers to look at active ageing in a comprehensive way. It offers the broader perspective of different dimensions of contribution and potential of older people. In doing so, it helps policy-makers and practitioners to understand where they could do better compared to other countries and set themselves goals for a higher and more balanced form of active ageing.

The AAI comprises twenty-two individual indicators grouped in four domains: Employment; Social participation; Independent living, and Capacity for active ageing. All indicators and their aggregation into composite measures are available separately for men and women, indicating also what progress could be achieved simply by closing gender gaps (for a detailed description of the methodology, see Zaidi et al 2013).

Main findings based on the latest 2014 AAI

The AAI 2014 results reflect the degree to which healthy and active life during old age has become a reality for the current generation of older Europeans. Figure 2 illustrates the position of 28 European Union (EU) Member States using the latest data available (for details, UNECE / European Commission 2015).

Sweden is at the top of the ranking across the 28 EU Member States, followed closely by Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Four southern European countries (Italy, Portugal, Spain and Malta) are middle-ranked countries together with most other Western European countries. Greece and the majority of the Central and Eastern European countries are at the bottom of the ranking.

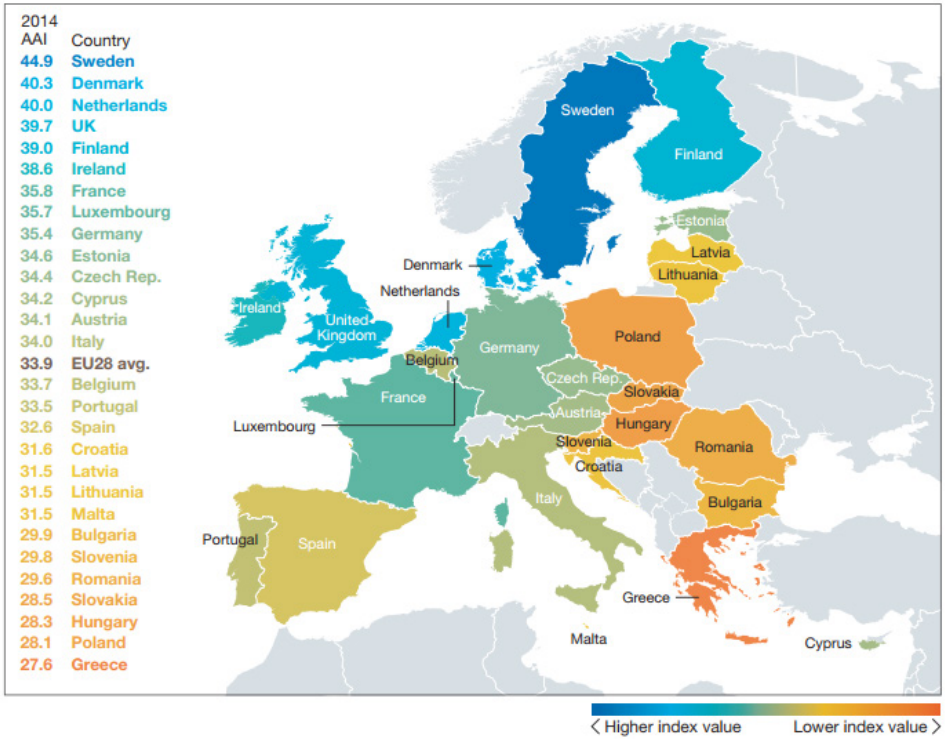

Figure 2: Ranking of 28 EU Member States based on the 2014 overall AAI
(Source: UNECE & European Commission (2015), p. 18)

The top position of Nordic and Western European countries is in large part because of their policies sustaining employment levels among older workers who are reaching retirement and providing income security and access to healthcare to their retired population. The AAI data shows that even in these countries there is scope for improvement in some individual dimensions of active and healthy ageing.

The AAI data shows that active ageing has also an important non-financial component. There are examples that show this: the United Kingdom and Denmark are respectively 7th and 10th in the ranking for social participation and they can learn from the examples of Ireland and Italy, which have much higher scores in this respect.

Conversely, lower income Central and Eastern European countries as well as Greece face a greater challenge and need to address how they can make their policies supportive and sustainable. Within the low scores for the overall AAI some countries nevertheless achieved employment scores above the EU-28 average (Portugal with 33 points and Latvia with 32 points). In contrast, Greece (20), Spain (23) and Hungary (19) are all much lower than the EU-28 average of 28 points.

The fact that countries at the top of the AAI score have done consistently well across all the four domains is an indication that active ageing is a coherent policy area where a balanced and well-founded approach can lead to achievements that leave nobody behind. Very few countries, however, score consistently at the very top in each individual indicator of active ageing, indicating that there might be trade-offs and different priorities across these countries in achieving progress with respect to active ageing.

Unexpected AAI scores provide some interesting policy lessons. For example, Estonia achieves a very high employment score despite having a relatively low GDP per capita and its employment score for women (40 points) is of special note. Malta scores well across most domains, especially for men, but its overall score is pulled down because of its lowest score for women's employment (8.5 points only). Understanding why this is so and why other countries achieve far higher levels of employment among older women will help Malta formulate policies to achieve a higher overall score.

An analysis of the relationship between the AAI and life satisfaction implies that a higher AAI is correlated with a higher quality of life of older people. Likewise, a positive relationship is observed between the AAI and GDP per capita. These correlations imply that a push towards active ageing does not imply a worsening of older people's quality of life, and it brings real benefits to the economy. There is a weak inverse relationship between the AAI and each EU Member State's income inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient).

Monitoring trends in the AAI for 28 EU Countries

In its current stage, with results for three data points, the Active Ageing Index has started to allow the benchmarking of country performances. It can therefore be hoped that the AAI data will encourage European countries to look at policies and programmes that other countries have adopted, and learn from those experiences — both positive and otherwise.

Looking at trends between the 2010 AAI (year 2008) and the 2014 AAI (year 2012), an increase of 2 points is recorded on average across EU28 countries. An increase by three points or more is observed in nine EU countries during this period. This improvement is quite remarkable given the financial and economic crisis and fiscal austerity measures observed during this period. It is also reassuring in favour of active ageing strategies that policies to phase out early retirement and to raise the age of retirement were not reversed during the crisis. Further progress can be expected in active ageing outcomes once economic and budgetary conditions have returned to normal.

The highest increase observed is in the Social Participation domain, about 3 points, with two other domains increasing by about 2 points each, (Independent Living and Capacity for Active Ageing). For the Employment domain, the change is marginal (0.6 point). Significantly, all four domains registered increases. For most countries, the changes in the overall index for men and for women also showed improvement, although with a significant gender gap in almost all countries. Overall, it is safe to say that some progress has been made with regard to active ageing in EU countries over this period. It is unclear though how much of this progress is attributable to policy changes, how much is the result of cohort effects (which may reflect policy choices of past decades) and how much is simply the result of data inconsistencies. Further in-depth analysis is required to draw further policy insights from these results.

Synthesizing discussion

The AAI framework offers policymakers with evidence in key areas of active and healthy ageing to enable them to assess their country's relative position as of 2012. Each country's position highlights where policy areas for older people are already effective and where they need further development.

Comparisons with other countries help highlight for each country where the biggest potentials lie and where they can look to others' achievements in policy design. These comparisons and assessments inform policy makers and allow them to set targets and monitor progress towards them.

Most importantly, the active ageing strategies moves policy thinking away from a one-sided concern about affordability where older people are viewed as a burden. Data presented in the AAI contribute towards raising awareness of the challenges and opportunities for older people as well to seek ways to develop their full potential, not just to enhance their own well-being, but also to the prosperity of societies in which they live.

Many aspects of active ageing are influenced by policies at the regional and local level. The effectiveness of the AAI as a tool for fostering better policies for active ageing therefore depends largely on its adoption by local and regional policymakers and stakeholders. An important next step is to use the AAI framework for comparing individual regions within countries (as in Poland, Spain and Italy).

A final point to make concerns the often-expressed idea that adopting and implementing a comprehensive active ageing paradigm will be expensive, and too expensive for poorer countries to implement. In fact, this is not the case as people making these remarks rarely do the math correctly. Active ageing strate-

gies based on social investment principles prevent the loss of valuable expertise, preserve the potential of older people, and strengthen society's human and structural resilience. The cost for managing ageing actively is much cheaper than the passive management of older people left marginalised and dependent fully on the state and family.

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