

# Older Persons & COVID-19

Strengthening health &  
rights through collective  
action



World Health  
Organization



United Nations  
Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs



UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

HelpAge  
International

## Older Persons & COVID-19: Strengthening health & rights through collective action

Tuesday, 28 July 2020

16:30-17:30 CET (Geneva), 10:30-11:30 EDT (New York)

Livestream: [unf.pa/olderpersonscovid19](https://unfpa.org/olderpersonscovid19)

## Background

COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the health and rights of older persons in society. While the virus spreads among persons of all ages, older persons and those with underlying medical conditions are at higher risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19. Symptomatic individuals in their seventies are twenty times more likely to require hospitalization than young adults, and case fatality rates suggest a notable increase in risk after age 60, with progressively worse outcomes at older ages. Less visible but no less worrisome are the broader effects of the global crisis: health care denied for conditions unrelated to COVID-19; neglect and abuse in institutions and care facilities; the increase in poverty and unemployment; the dramatic impact on well-being and mental health; and the trauma of stigma and discrimination. As the pandemic spreads across low, middle and high income countries, the needs of older persons may also differ, and severe disease and mortality rates for older persons may increase even further if fragile health and social protection systems are overwhelmed.

Efforts to protect older persons should not overlook the diversity of older persons, their resilience and positivity, and the multiple roles they play in society, including as producers, caregivers, volunteers and leaders. We must also recognize their important contributions to the current crisis, including as health workers and care providers. Their contributions underpin our society, before, during and beyond COVID-19. Many actors – States, businesses, international organizations, civil society and community groups and older persons themselves – have been actively drawing attention to their challenges and needs, delivering services at community level and ensuring that older people’s voices and opinions are heard.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the United Nations has given priority to the needs of older persons in its collective preparedness and response action at global, regional and country level. The UN Secretary-General’s [Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons](#) underscores the imperative of protecting the human rights of older persons and responding to their specific needs. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ (UNDESA) [Issue Brief on Older Persons and COVID-19](#) draws attention to the specific challenges and needs of older persons in the pandemic. The United Nations Population Fund’s (UNFPA) Technical Brief on [Implications of COVID-19 for Older Persons](#) provides guidance to UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams on scaling up urgent measures for older persons, in keeping with the UNFPA COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan. In addition to its [COVID-19 Strategy](#), the World Health Organization’s (WHO) technical guidance on [infection prevention and control, clinical management](#), and [maintaining essential health services](#), including [community-based health care](#), all cover older persons, as does its brief on [COVID-19 and violence against older people](#). All of these documents provide recommendations for practical actions that countries can take at local, national and regional levels to address the needs of older persons, and to support the [Decade of Healthy Ageing](#), a broader inter-agency initiative led by WHO.

## Objectives

The focus of this event is on how the United Nations, together with civil society partners, can support Member States at global, regional and country level to collectively step up action for older persons to preserve their rights and dignity at all times. UNFPA and WHO, in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNDESA and HelpAge International are co-hosting this virtual convening to:

- Commit to strengthen collective action to support countries – governments, civil society and community organizations – to ensure the rights of older persons and respond to their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond;
- Amplify voices from older persons and in-country responders to understand the emerging challenges in the implementation of policies and practices for COVID-19;
- Share good practices from national actors around the health, rights and social protection of older persons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Proposed Agenda

**Moderator Raj Kumar**, Founding President and Editor-in-Chief, DEVEX, opens with powerful statistics on the situation of older persons and COVID19 and the need for scaling up collective UN action:

### ***Setting the scene***

- **Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, Director-General, WHO
- **Dr Natalia Kanem**, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UNFPA

### ***Voices from countries and communities***

- Short video from Asia and Pacific Region with voices of older persons (HelpAge)
- **Arun Maira** (Chair of the Board, HelpAge International) (Unique strengths and risks of older populations; global and regional responses underway in countries)
- **Dr Alex Kalache**, President of International Longevity Centre, Brazil (ILC-Brazil) (What greater UN and civil society collective action would look like.)
- **Ms Christine Umutoni**, Resident Coordinator Mauritius and Seychelles (UN collective action at country level.)
- **Dr Naeema Al Gasseer**, Senior Advisor to World Health Organization Regional Director at Eastern Mediterranean Region (incoming WHO Representative in Egypt, outgoing WHO Representative in Sudan)
- **Dr Octavio Vergara**, Director of the National Services for Elderly (SENAMA), Government of Chile

### ***Commitments for collective action***

- **Ms Laila Baker**, Regional Director, Arab States, Development Coordination Office
- **Claudia Mahler**, Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of all Human Rights by Older Persons
- **Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, Director-General, WHO
- **Dr Natalia Kanem**, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UNFPA