Message from Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia, on International Day of Older Persons

The first of October every year is observed as the International Day of Older Persons. It is an opportunity to highlight the important contributions that older people make to society and raise awareness about the issues and challenges of ageing in today’s world.

As a result of declining fertility rates and increased life expectancy, ageing is emerging as a key policy issue around the world. There are around 600 million people, or 10% of the world’s population, over the age of 60. By 2050, 80% of older people will be living in low- and middle-income countries. It is estimated that nearly 142 million people or about 8% of the total population in the South-East Asia Region is over 60 years old and lives in urban areas.

Unfortunately, it is often assumed that an increase in longevity is accompanied by an extended period of good health. Evidence suggests that older people are not experiencing better health than previous generations, and that those who have experienced disadvantage across their lifetime have a higher risk of poor health.

Barriers to developing good public health policies on ageing include the persistence of harmful misconceptions, attitudes and stereotypes about older people.

One key initiative to overcome this problem was the Director-General’s call to develop, in cooperation with other partners, a global campaign to combat ageism in order to add value to local initiatives and to achieve the ultimate goal of enhancing the day-to-day experiences of older people and optimize policy responses.

“Ageism”, the stereotyping and discrimination against people on the basis of age, is a serious social prejudice with significant consequences for older people.

We experience ageism any time someone assumes that we’re “too old” or “too young” for something instead of finding out who we are and what we are capable of, as ageism cuts both ways through the life course.

Like racism and sexism, discrimination on the basis of age serves a social and economic purpose: to legitimize and sustain inequalities between groups. Stereotyping – the assumption that all members of a group are the same – underlies ageism (as it does all “isms”).
A forthcoming study by the WHO Department of Ageing and Life Course analyzing survey results in 57 countries indicates that ageism is highly prevalent, with 60% of 83,804 respondents reporting that older people were perceived as not respected.

To promote healthy ageing throughout the life course, WHO South-East Asia is committed to ensuring the Regional Framework on Healthy Ageing is implemented and further operationalizes the principles of the Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health. This means solidifying Region-wide commitment to action on Healthy Ageing; the development of age-friendly environments; the alignment of health systems to the needs of older populations; the development of sustainable and equitable systems for providing long-term care and the improvement of measurements, monitoring and research on Healthy Ageing.

A longer life brings great opportunities. Yet the extent to which we as individuals and society more broadly can benefit from these extra years depends heavily on one key factor: health.

WHO will continue to work with other UN agencies, partners and Member States towards developing public health policies aimed at empowering older people and changing the mindset of society on ageing.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh
Regional Director