

EU Statement at opening session (Monday, 18 April)

- The European Union would like to congratulate you, Mr. Chairman, upon your election to this office, and wishes you all the best for a fruitful conduct of the working group. We welcome the establishment of this OEWG as an opportunity for UN member states to sharpen our understanding of the human rights of older people around the world, and to engage in an in-depth exchange with experts, and to share information and best practices.
- In many countries, people today are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. Since 1960, the average life expectancy in Europe has climbed by eight years and demographic projections foresee a further five-year increase over the next forty years. This is a historic achievement.
- It means however that, together with the low birth rates of the past decades, Europe's population is ageing fast, and it is something that is happening in many other countries as well. One in every 10 people in the EU is now aged 60 or more. By 2050, one in five people will be over 60 years old. The strongest push in this direction is expected to occur during the period 2015-35 when today's baby boomers start to retire.
- Ageing is often perceived as a threat instead of one of our greatest achievements. With the growing number of older people, this population is often seen as an economic burden on those who are younger and of working-age. Such fears neglect, however, the fact that a growing number of older people are in good health, and have valuable skills and experience that allow them to make a significant contribution to all the community. Staying active as we grow older is key to tackling the challenge of demographic ageing.
- Active ageing is not just about the participation of older persons in the labour market, it is about their active contribution to society through a range of activities including voluntary work, or the possibility to live independently thanks to adapted housing and infrastructure. It is also about the provision of services and technologies that reduce the dependence of older people on others. However, data on retrogressive social policies and measures, and the impact of the financial crises demonstrate a disproportionate impact on older persons in some countries. Changes in pensions systems, coverage of health services, and reductions in social protections are some areas in which the elderly stand to lose most.
- Ageing is part of the human life-cycle. Throughout human history, people of all cultures have expressed reverence and admiration for the old. However, older persons all too often find themselves marginalized and neglected members of our societies. The EU therefore believes it fundamental that the recognition of the dignity and worth of the human person throughout all stages of life, and as expressed in the UDHR, and combating discrimination, including based on age, must be at the core of all our action, be it at the national or international level. That implies that elderly persons should be able to fully participate in their societies and that their rights, including with respect to health care and social security, have to be protected. Moreover, older persons should have access to information about their rights.

- Finally, please allow me to reiterate the EU's strong interest in surveying, over the coming days, the existing framework for the human rights of older persons, and in identifying possible gaps in this regard. We are looking forward to presenting some of the relevant ongoing activities of the EU over the next days.

I thank you.