



Connecting to the Digital World: Leaving No Older Person Behind

Theresa Devasahayam reports from the Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) held in Bangkok, 29 June–1 July 2022

“Population ageing has exploded worldwide. The Asia Pacific region is no different as the older person population has been growing steadily over the recent decades. In fact, currently 60 percent of the world’s older aged population resides in the region, a figure projected to increase to 25 percent by 2050. Old age comes with a range of opportunities and challenges not only to older persons but also to governments. The Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing ([MIPAA](#)) was held in Bangkok 29 June–1 July 2022. MIPAA was adopted by the Second World Assembly on Ageing, held in Madrid from 8 to 12 April 2002, and endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 57/167 of 18 December 2002.

A range of issues related to older persons was discussed at the Meeting: advancing health in old age, universal healthcare, the care needs of older persons and supportive mechanisms for their well-being, the practical implications of active ageing, labour force participation, education and training, poverty, income security, social protections, housing and living environments and intergenerational solidarity. Other issues raised included: the mental health of older persons, long-term care, government budgetary allocation for geriatric needs, lifelong learning, gender-sensitive policies and rights-based approaches to addressing population ageing issues.

At the Meeting, a session was devoted to ensuring enabling and supportive environments for older persons. Entitled *Enabling Environment or Future: Focus on Digital Inclusion and Built Environments*, all the presenters spoke to various issues related to the building of conducive environments for older persons and facilitating the acquisition of digital skills among them, seeing this as a necessary and integral step towards the attainment of social development and for ensuring that no older person is left behind. Speakers emphasised that growing numbers of older persons were using smartphones even those past 75 years of age. Increasingly there is a need to be technologically, mentally, socially, and psychologically active among older persons. Digital tools not only connected people but those who used technological tools were more likely to have fewer morbidities and were less lonely. It was also highlighted how older persons were goaded towards using the smartphones during the pandemic; unlike previously when they were more hesitant. The case study of Singapore was presented where the government has successfully created ICT spaces. But unlike the younger generations, older persons have unique challenges in terms of accessing and using digital technologies. The experience of older women is unique in that they, more than older men, are more likely to be less literate, may not have access to internet services, nor might they be able to afford internet access, let alone purchase a smartphone. In this respect, women are more disadvantaged than men.

At the Meeting, Soroptimist International United Nations’ Representative Dr Theresa Devasahayam delivered the following statement:

“I am Dr Theresa Devasahayam, speaking on behalf of Soroptimist International. Thank you for this opportunity to make this statement.

Population ageing continues to sweep across the Asia Pacific region. This is occurring coupled with rapid, transformative, social changes linked to technological innovations.

Accessing healthcare through digital technologies is becoming commonplace today. Patients pivot between offline and online in their health journey. So, it is imperative that every person, regardless of age, has the capacity to access and utilise digital technologies effectively and efficiently.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significance of telemedicine: delivering care at a distance, while simultaneously enabling access to timely and cost-effective healthcare services. Where a doctor is unavailable, telemedicine enables older persons to seek expert advice while at home. In Asian countries with a huge urban/rural divide, telemedicine helps rural communities by cutting travel costs and wage losses.

In the Asia Pacific, governments should take the necessary steps to raise the digital skills of older persons so that they can access relevant and timely health information and, in turn, take better control of their lives.

How can this be achieved? Firstly, digital infrastructure should be established keeping in mind how older persons might be encouraged to access it. Secondly, governments, industry and schools could offer basic digital literacy information through community volunteers who visit older persons to help them learn simple digital tools. Peer-to-peer digital volunteers may be integral in this effort as well, to the extent that older persons themselves help their own counterparts in sharing information on ICT use. Thirdly, there could be collaboration between governments and the private sector to ensure low-cost internet access or even ex gratias access, so as many older persons as possible become digitally connected.

Because women are disproportionately represented among those with less education as well as are more likely not to engage in activities connected to the public sphere, efforts to encourage their use of digital technologies should be gender sensitive. Community digital literacy projects and programmes should take into account that older women have less access to the internet and fewer own mobile phones than older men do. Overcoming these challenges should ensure that older women and men are on an equal footing to reap the benefits of digital tools.

Boosting technological inclusivity should be the priority of governments in the Asia Pacific in coming years. Knowledge is power; and reinforcing the rights of older persons to participate in the digital world serves to empower them.

Thank you so much.”

Rich examples of good practices related to raising the digital skills of older persons were shared at the Meeting. One way of sharing knowledge and information on the use of digital tools is lifelong training programmes run by governments or non-governmental organisations. Another is the role of library groups who may also be instrumental in aiding older persons in learning how to use digital technologies. There are younger persons who could become involved in helping older persons learn new digital skills; in addition to peer-to-peer training, that is older persons sharing their experiences of using ICT with their own contemporaries – a means lauded as a particularly successful method of imparting information.

In this rapidly changing world in which being digitally informed is vital in everyday life, Soroptimist International might want to become involved in bridging the gap between older persons and the digital world. Clubs interested in reaching out to older women who are less literate or who have less education could consider following a model comprising of “digital volunteers”. These volunteers could either consist of club members themselves or younger women volunteers who might be interested in the cause of helping impart ICT knowledge to older less literate women (as well as older men). Such efforts need not be projects in themselves but rather ad hoc actions to address a specific purpose. There is a twofold advantage in using volunteers: first, they have a personal touch which is

integral to the mental and emotional growth of older persons, aside from enabling them to learn a new skill. And second, if younger persons become more involved in the lives of older persons, this serves to build intergenerational solidarity and cohesion in society at large.”

SI (SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL) LIMITED

REGISTERED OFFICE: 8a ROMSEY TERRACE, CAMBRIDGE CB1 3NH UK COMPANY NUMBER 08670477

E-mail: hg@soroptimistinternational.org Website: www.soroptimistinternational.org

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