



Background

The UN General Assembly designated the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP), when it adopted the *Proclamation on ageing* in 1992. The Proclamation urged the international community to facilitate collaboration across sectors and nations, and to reach out to the development community, the media, the private sector and younger generations in an effort to create a society for all ages.

United Nations programs have consistently promoted the fullest possible participation of older persons in their societies and the recognition of their needs and concerns. In 1982, in Vienna, the General Assembly endorsed the *International Plan of Action on Ageing*. Subsequently, the General Assembly adopted the *United Nations Principles for Older Persons* in 1991.

United Nations principles for older persons

Independence

1. Older persons should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and healthcare through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help.
2. Older persons should have the opportunity to work or to have access to other income-generating opportunities.
3. Older persons should be able to participate in determining when and at what pace withdrawal from the labour force takes place.
4. Older persons should have access to appropriate educational and training programs.
5. Older persons should be able to live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preferences and changing capacities.
6. Older persons should be able to reside at home for as long as possible.



Participation

7. Older persons should remain integrated in society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations.
8. Older persons should be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities.
9. Older persons should be able to form movements or associations of older persons.

Care

10. Older persons should benefit from family and community care and protection in accordance with each society's system of cultural values.
11. Older persons should have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness.
12. Older persons should have access to social and legal services to enhance their autonomy, protection and care.
13. Older persons should be able to utilise appropriate levels of institutional care providing protection, rehabilitation and social and mental stimulation in a humane and secure environment.



14. Older persons should be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives.

Self-Fulfillment

15. Older persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential.
16. Older persons should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.

Dignity

17. Older persons should be able to live in dignity and security and be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse.
18. Older persons should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution.

Naming of the Year

It was difficult to determine how the target population was to be 'named'....old, older, ageing, senior, mature, aged, retiree.... age has fairly negative media coverage. Certainly the original UN descriptor of International Year of the Elderly would have elicited great protest and lack of engagement in the Year.

The definition of 'older' is a subjective one and, for the purposes of IYOP, was defined by AC '99 as starting at 50 years. The UN and other non-government organisations (NGOs) start at 65. In Australia it was startling to discover that employers were using 40 years+ to define an older, even 'old' employee. Getting older is an ongoing experience relevant to as many as five decades of a person's life. Consequently no one image or article is indicative of the lifespan just as no one image of a teenager is emblematic of the teenage experience.

The most accurate reflection of older age is one that communicates human diversity, and a range of both positive and negative human experiences. Throughout the Year there continued to be an evident discomfort, often shown by older people themselves, at the use of age-related descriptors. Most people did not want to identify or anticipate ageing.

The term 'older persons' accommodates the larger population as it is a reference to both chronological and relative ageing. This complements the positioning statement, or slogan, 'towards a society for all ages' reiterating the relevance of IYOP to all Australians.

The non-government approach to IYOP

In 1995, Council on the Ageing (Australia) led a number of forward-thinking older persons' organisations and individuals to establish a project called Australian Coalition '99 (AC '99) to start planning for the United Nations designated International Year of Older Persons 1999. This not-for-profit and non-political initiative by the non-government sector is unprecedented in the development of an International Year in this country.

The objective of the Coalition was to bring about positive, real and sustainable change in many aspects of life for older Australians by engaging older people themselves in decision making and planning.