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Mobilising Half of Societies' Brain Power

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The international recognition of the challenges of population aging goes back more than 3 decades, when in 1991 the «**Principles of Older Persons**» were adopted by the United Nations, while only in 2012 the OECD has launched the »**Silver Economy Initiative**«. However, only some countries have followed with needed systemic action, and most of their attention remains focused primarily on care and healthcare policies, while mobilisation of economic and particularly the intellectual potential of seniors receive little attention by the responsables at national and regional levels.

The intensity of demographic changes over the last half century has been so big that most societies are still not fully aware of their dimensions and broader implications. All projections indicate further extension of life expectancy (towards 85 years by 2050). The IBRD and WHO statistics indicate that **we lived in 2020 an average of 72.5 years, which is even 20 years more than in 1960**, and that the total population over 60 years will have doubled by 2050 compared to 2000.

It is far from general knowledge that - according to the World Bank - the **share of Silver Economy** in global GDP is currently about 30%, and will grow to close to **40% by 2050**. The age group whose contribution will grow significantly faster than others are the seniors, as they are the wealthiest age category in the world. Until 2030, the silver economy will gain even more absolute strength, because the number of seniors is growing by 3.2 % every year, compared to 0.8 % of the whole population.

According to the latest demographic forecasts, the seniors will represent in Europe by 2060 **1/3 of the total population**, and that implies that the age structure of the labor market will undergo major changes. Mandatory working age will have to be extended

for at least 5 years, (some minor extensions of 2-3 years have already been introduced in Japan, Singapore, Korea, followed by a couple of European countries). In future a much higher share of seniors above 70 years will continue working in various flexible modalities for another 5 - 10 years. Many of the seniors will decide to open their own companies, and will receive free advice, training and consultancy.

In public opinion, seniors are still predominantly perceived as the people needed to be cared about and imposing growing public expenditures. However, statistics for France, for example, gives a very different picture: **only 6% of people above 50 years are actually in a dependant state.** During the decade 2015-2025 the seniors are expected to contribute even 50% to the global Gross Value Added growth, about 30% to growth of productivity, and 13% to overall employment. Actually, seniors are the most intensely growing segment of society - with highest potential for spending and contributing greatly to paying taxes.

Also, there is a strong imbalance between dominant awareness of the “burden” of securing good care and health services needed by seniors, and modest recognition of their intellectual and even financial potential. It is a strange paradox that seniors - as the most dynamic social group - with more financial assets, almost half of them still professionally active, still remain marginalised.

And perhaps the worst impact of this isolation of seniors, is that we are excluding from social interaction about **a half of the existing intellectual potential in our societies.** Namely, the seniors have – besides completed education – also an enormous amount of competences and skills, developed through their active life experience. The value of practical knowledge, popularly referred to as “wisdom”, is most precious, and by marginalising seniors, we are wasting this valuable potential – which is equivalent of at least half of society’s brain power! This is particularly unfortunate, because most **seniors are highly motivated to share their relevant knowledge and skills** - even not commercially, but as their contribution to solve relevant problems in an organisation, or at society level.

The delay in adjusting **public perception of the seniors** is creating a serious lack of needed policy adjustments. Governments are faced with steeply rising expenditures on elderly care and health services – both being under increasing pressure, which is giving a negative connotation to the challenges of aging.

Why is adjustment to population aging so slow and insufficient? It is primarily since **politicians perceive seniors largely as a financial burden** – instead of realizing their economic and political (even electoral) potential. Unfortunately, they are not under political pressure from seniors, due to their predominantly passive stand. In some countries pensioners’ parties have been created, but with rather limited results. Unfortunately, many seniors are accepting the old-fashioned view of being a burden on society, which is demobilizing them politically. Many believe that nothing can be

changed anyway – which is completely false. However, changes require political mobilisation, including the seniors, and that leads to solving problems – including those of the seniors!

The authorities will be willing to act only if a well-coordinated pressure will come from various social actors: economic operators, members of senior community, regional governments, the academics doing research, and teaching on population aging, as well as from the media. It is however important, that the seniors introduce their requests as proposal for **instruments of broader societal modernization**, not just addressing their own issues.

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