CONCLUSIONS OF THE CARIBBEAN CONFERENCE ON AGEING, ELDER ABUSE AND THE RIGHTS OF OLDER PERSONS

The Caribbean Conference on Ageing, Elder Abuse and the Rights of Older Persons was held in Roseau, Dominica, during 30th November to 1st December 2015.

The conference was organised by the Dominica Council on Ageing (DCOA) in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Services, Family and Gender Affairs of Dominica; and the Association for the Promotion and Integration of Older Persons of Martinique (AMDOR) with the substantive support of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). This conference builds on the two Caribbean Conferences on Abuse of Older Persons which were held in Martinique in 2010 and Guadeloupe in 2013. The meeting was a valuable opportunity for a timely exchange of views among representatives of government, academia and civil society on common issues and challenges related to:

- the protection and promotion of the human rights of older persons;
- economic security for older persons;
- strategies to promote healthy ageing;
- the provision of social care services for older persons;
- protecting older persons against abuse and neglect;
- the promotion of active ageing and the participation of older persons in all aspects of society.

REPRESENTATION

Representatives from Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Martinique, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago participated in the conference.

Representation from regional and international organizations included the Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM); the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA); the Organisation of American States (OAS); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); the University of the West Indies (UWI). There were also representatives from HelpAge International, the Federation 3977 against the Abuse of Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities, France and other non-governmental organizations.

OPENING CEREMONY

The meeting was opened by the Acting Minister for Social Services, Family and Gender Affairs of Dominica, Justina Charles, and the Director of the ECLAC Subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, Diane Quarless. Also participating were Ophelia Olivacce-Marie of the Dominica Council of Ageing (DCOA) and Frantz Remy, the Director of AMDOR. There were then presentations from ECLAC on ‘Ageing in the Caribbean and the Rights of Older Persons’ and on ‘Elder Abuse’, by the Federation 3977 against the Abuse of Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities, France.
SUMMARY OF PANEL PRESENTATIONS

PANEL ONE analysed the human rights of older persons from international and national perspectives. It discussed the new Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons which was approved in June 2015, making the Americas the first region in the world to have an instrument for the protection of the rights of older persons. The panel also considered how national legislation, drafted with careful regard to international treaties, contributes to the protection and fulfilment of the rights of older persons. Also discussed were the rights of older persons in disaster and emergency situations.

PANEL TWO addressed the issue of economic security and social protection. The discussion focused on the problem of poverty among older persons and the related challenges for social protection systems. Exclusion from income-generating activities, ineligibility for social security pensions and lack of family support and care were major problems affecting the elderly. Inadequate housing is a particular problem among older persons living in poverty, many of whom lack the income to adequately maintain their homes. The financial abuse of older persons, mainly by the expropriation of their income or assets by family, friends or caregivers was also highlighted.

PANEL THREE gave attention to issues linked to healthy ageing. The growing problem of non-communicable diseases, its link to population ageing and the efforts of Caribbean governments to meet this challenge were discussed. It was agreed that this challenge will demand an increasing investment in public health care services. Public investment is also needed to address inequality of access to health care services. Though senior citizens have access to free healthcare, the limited availability of publicly provided medicines means that often elderly persons in need have to find alternative methods of treatment, sometimes avoiding it all together and in other cases self-medicating. The meeting acknowledged that the growing epidemic of lifestyle related diseases will continue to exert a heavy burden on national health services. Policy interventions to promote early prevention to limit the projected increases in the prevalence of these diseases were advocated. In this regard, the suite of policy actions to address unhealthy diets and obesity currently under review by the CARICOM Council on Trade and Economic Development was welcomed.

PANEL FOUR considered the broad provision of social care services including home care, nursing care, day care and activity centres and long-stay institutions. The meeting received presentations of national experiences and best practices in the management of social care services; how to improve the quality of such services; and strategies to minimize or prevent neglect and abuse by caregivers. The role of the government in the monitoring, inspection and regulation of both public and privately provided services, particularly long-stay institutions, was emphasized, including the need for the establishment of a legislative framework to regulate the delivery of such services.

PANEL FIVE highlighted the need for more effective protection of older persons in the family and the community. Issues concerning the welfare of older persons included neglect,
abandonment, and abuse of older persons. There was a focus on the importance of legislation, regulations and programmes to tackle abuse. In this regard, the discussion identified the roles of different agencies in addressing abuse, and the importance of multi-agency cooperation in identifying and preventing abuse.

**PANEL SIX** addressed social and physical isolation and loneliness among older persons and the impact of constraints such as declining personal mobility, inaccessible transport and how the inability to continue living independently can limit older person’s ability to participate fully in community life. The conference heard from a representative of the Grenada Association of Retired Persons on how groups representing the interests of older persons can serve as advocates for the interests of older persons.

The meeting received a special presentation by Dr. Gerald Grell on Ma Pampo and the Centenarians of Dominica.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the excellent presentations, information, ideas and rich discussions during the conference, the following summary conclusions and recommendations were identified:

1. Population ageing will substantially change Caribbean societies. With the number of older persons set to double over the next twenty years there must be an increased priority, and increased funding, given to policies for older persons. There is a need to plan, and manage, the costs of providing pensions, health and social care services. At the same time, societies can no longer afford to ignore the contribution that older people can make to economic, civic, community and family life. Older persons should have the opportunity to participate in all sectors of society on the basis of equality and rights and free from discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

2. All Caribbean States should take specific measures to protect and fulfil the rights of older persons. Governments should ensure an adequate standard of living for older persons, promotion of their physical and mental health, and protection from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Beyond their intrinsic value, human rights provide normative standards which can provide a framework for guiding the public policy response to population ageing. Caribbean governments are urged to study the new Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons and consider signing and ratifying it.

3. Legislation is fundamental to the protection and fulfilment of the rights of older persons in areas such as: social security; equality of access to health care; regulation and monitoring of social care services particularly long-stay institutions; preventing elder abuse; and regulation of the pension and insurance industry.

4. Older people should be included in all aspects of disaster risk management: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. They should be consulted on their needs in
disaster and emergency situations, registered for assistance, and encouraged to take leadership roles in their communities. Emergency health providers must provide continuity of care and medication to older persons with chronic health needs.

5. After natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies, there should be legal protection for older persons, advice centres, and information to raise awareness of entitlements. There must be equal access for older persons to food, shelter, medical care and other services.

6. There is an urgent need to improve pension provision for older persons to ensure, first, that all older persons have a pension income and, second, that the minimum pension income provides an adequate standard of living (for example at or above the national poverty line). To achieve this, governments will need to examine how to increase the levels of funding for non-contributory pensions. Efforts should also be made to expand and ensure the sustainability of contributory social security systems. Barriers to the continued employment of older persons such as compulsory retirement ages, and inflexible working arrangements should be reconsidered.

7. There is a need to put in place policies to address the financial abuse of older persons. Social service providers, private sector organisations, older persons and their families all need to be sensitized to warning signs of abuse and older persons need to be provided with information about the risks and how they can protect themselves. Pension providers and banks should consider how they interact with older persons and take measures to minimize the risk of third parties expropriating their income or assets. In some circumstances, reverse mortgage arrangements can be a useful arrangement for asset rich, cash poor older persons, but they need to be stringently regulated.

8. In the Caribbean, the ageing of the population and the growing prevalence of NCDs are increasingly interlinked. The early prevention of these diseases is central to healthy ageing.

9. The costs, based on current projections, both in terms of health care and loss of productivity are unsustainable. There is need for cost-effective public health policy interventions; and for comprehensive programs of prevention and control. There is need for improvement in chronic care, especially for treatment in primary care to promote healthy living from an early age. Universal health coverage is the principal characteristic of high performing chronic care systems.

10. Health services need to plan for the care and treatment of increasing numbers of older persons. Public expenditure on health care should be gradually increased to meet the needs of ageing populations and ensure equality of access to services. Services also need to be re-shaped to meet the needs of older persons with greater focus on geriatric medicine, the training of health care professionals to better respond to the needs of
older persons and the design of age-friendly health centres. Palliative care should also be a priority.

11. Social care services should be provided to older persons on the basis of need, to enable them to continue living with independence and autonomy. Such services should include home help services, home nursing care, day care centres and activity centres. The coverage and quality of social care services for older persons must be improved. There must also be greater monitoring of the quality of services and training for caregivers.

12. There will likely be an increase in the number of older persons living in residential and nursing homes. There should be strong legislation governing the licensing, monitoring and inspection of homes. Homes which do not provide an acceptable standard of care should face sanctions, for example warnings; the suspension of new admissions until problems are resolved; suspension or cancellation of registration; and ultimately legal proceedings against those that violate the law.

13. Consideration should also be given to the establishment of appropriate monitoring mechanisms to facilitate the reporting of abuse in homes for the elderly.

14. Governments should strengthen legislation to deal with elder abuse. Legislation should establish mechanisms to identify cases of abuse or suspected abuse and provide government agencies with the authority to intervene in cases of serious abuse. There should be training and guidelines for health care workers, social workers, care workers or caregivers to help them to recognise and screen for abuse, and protocols for referrals and reporting. Inter-agency cooperation is vital both to identify and prevent abuse. In suspected cases of abuse, case managers should be assigned to help victims obtain the support that they need to achieve redress.

15. Isolation and loneliness are major problems for older persons. Older people should be supported to remain living in their own homes close to family and friends. There should be support for home adaptations to enable independent living and accessible transport to facilitate continued community engagement.

16. Older persons should have access to social, educational, cultural and sporting programmes designed specifically to afford the elderly every opportunity to fully enjoy their senior years.