Statement for “Review of progress and challenges in accelerating the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, in Asia and the Pacific” on 29 June 2022,

By

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Good afternoon,
Everyone!

I’m Himanshu Rath from Agewell Foundation, India. We have been in Special Consultative Status with the United Nations since 2011. We have been working in this sector since 1999. Perhaps I happen to be one of the few people in this meeting, who also attended the Madrid convention.

In India, currently we are close to 140 million+ old people, which is the second largest elderly population in the world and therefore we have greater responsibility towards the welfare of older people. We, in India work with a network of about 80000 volunteers and interact with more than 25000 old people on a daily basis. While working for the elderly, so far, we have published 44 national Research Reports with a sample size of 10000 to 100 thousand. Many of these reports are available on the UN website and they are also available on our website www.agewellfoundation.org.

Present condition of older people is rather compromised because of the Covid-19. When it started, all fingers were pointed out at older people that perhaps they are the most vulnerable and this resulted in complete isolation of old people by family, by society, by everyone and they were the ones who suffered the most. Medication was not available to them, approaching a doctor was a problem as doctors were not available to them, there were so many compromises but the biggest and the worst was uncertainty towards the future. We all worked towards a better tomorrow for our elderly and suddenly most old people realize that probably there is no tomorrow. With the result the desperation levels among the old people went up. Since most people were living within the four walls during the lockdown around the world, relationships started snapping at each other. The entire ecosystem for old people is very much compromised. Even financial insecurity has creeped in with no knowledge about what is going to happen with my grandchildren. There is another compromise for older women, somehow a larger number of older people are women and there is hardly any focus on older women anywhere.
Unfortunately, policies are being made by bureaucrats around the world and most bureaucrats are below 60, so they themselves are not so old and they don't realize the needs of an older person. Therefore a large number of policies are being made but most of these policies, anywhere in the world, including India, are on paper. In terms of implementation there is very limited exercise. The government representatives make tall claims, but what is there on the ground? There’s hardly anything happening, so far as older people are concerned in any country. In most of the countries, these are tall claims made by the government authorities and unless we all collectively start looking at it in a more comprehensive manner, only these meetings will carry on.

We have been participating in every single deliberation at the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing in New York. 12 sessions have gone by. Nothing happens. Even government representatives, the governments don't even send their representatives this time when the meeting took place. There were only about 67 countries which participated though all of them have their missions in New York.

Even in this meeting what is happening? How many country representatives are there on behalf of their governments? Yes, there are great plans, yes there are advocates, yes, everybody is talking about old people and their needs but we hardly do anything. This is the biggest problem. Unless we start looking at older people as a consolidated part of our society, nothing will happen. Everybody talks about elder abuse, about human rights of older people but no sensitization is done. No textbooks talk about older people, there is hardly any initiative for digital literacy for older people.

We have been conducting digital literacy classes for the last seven years and more than hundred thousand people have been trained. But how does it help? Every old person you would come across, they might have a smartphone in hand. But how many of them actually know how to use a smartphone? So the whole scenario is so complex that unless we all collectively start complementing each other as advocates for older people. Otherwise, government officials, the bureaucrats come into a job for two years, three years and make some half-hearted policy and disappear which is never implemented. We all need to work in that direction and we all, from this field, need to intervene to ensure effective implementation of all older persons friendly policies at all levels.

Thank you very much.

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