

April 2023

Response by BAGSO to the call of the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of all human rights by older persons for the report on “Older persons in the context of climate change-induced disasters and building back better”

Legal, policy and institutional frameworks

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive response to this question about the existence of national legislation on emergency disasters. As mentioned in the background information for this call, the consequences of climate change are complex, encompassing extreme weather events like heat, droughts or long periods of extreme cold, air pollution, water quality and quantity and a lack of biodiversity, and other factors like food security, the transmission of infectious diseases or climate-related migration. Having said this, not one national legislation on emergency disasters will be able to handle the numerous challenges related and induced by climatic changes.

Overall, in Germany, there are several plans and strategies to mitigate the consequences of climate change, but only few are explicitly referring to older persons. More frequently such plans and strategies refer to vulnerable groups, listing several sub-groups as examples without referring to older persons (e.g. in the Federal Water Strategy of March 2023). The National Strategy for Strengthening Resilience to Disasters does not refer to specific population groups, despite the fact that it refers to demographic change as a factor influencing the country’s prevention and coping strategies. It also provides for a participatory approach to implementation and foresees a permanent participation platform. However, without mentioning older persons and other marginalised groups specifically this process is likely to not reflect the interests of all population groups.

Plans to respond to extreme heat are developed at local level. Recommendations for community heat plans have been developed as blueprint by a working group of

representative of the Federal government and the *Länder*. Older persons are mentioned as one of the population groups at risk. The City of Cologne has elaborated specific guidelines for people aged 65 and above and summarised them in its project report on “heat action plan for older persons”.

Access to information

As German National Association of Senior Citizens’ Organisations, we raise awareness of the special needs of older persons in various political contexts, e.g. the National Prevention Conference 2022 on climate and health. During extended heat periods, BAGSO informs the public about the risks for older persons, e.g. by providing recommendations via Facebook.

We also published a position paper on climate change as an intergenerational task calling for more climate protection and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It provides ideas of how to mitigate climate change and encourages older people’s organisations and other civil society organisations to take action.

More recently, BAGSO published a special issue on ageing in cities and communities sharing examples on how to turn urban spaces more age-friendly and sustainable. In this paper, we also refer to heat protection plans and other measures to contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In terms of information about climate change-induced health risks, a study undertaken in 2020 shows that a third of the participants aged 18 to 86 do not feel sufficiently informed.

Participation of older persons

We are not aware of any measures to ensure the full and meaningful participation of older persons specifically in addressing climate change-related disasters. There are so-called *Seniorenmitwirkungsgesetze* (law for the political participation of older persons) in several *Länder* (Berlin, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Thüringen and Bavaria). They provide for the consultation of older persons in political decision-making more generally. In addition, there are municipal councils of older persons (approx. 1.300) and councils at the level of the *Länder* (Landesseniorenvertretungen).

Despite the lack of measures, older persons do make their voice heard in relation to climate change. One example is the movement “Omas for Future”, which started in 2019 and is now active in over 75 cities. One of its aims is to educate the population 50+ on questions around sustainability. They developed quiz books and other

innovative measures for knowledge transfer. In 2022, the movement received the national award for sustainable education. Similarly, there are “Grandparents for Future”, a sub-movement of the “Fridays for Future”.

Some of BAGSO’s member organisations work on the theme of sustainability more generally, such as the *Grüne Alte* and the *kfd (Katholische Frauen Deutschlands)*.

Intersectionality

A study by one of the health insurance providers (AOK) shows the particular vulnerability of older persons to climate change. The data, collected in 2020 and published in the report “Klima und Gesundheit”, shows that older persons with dementia, renal insufficiency, respiratory diseases as well as depression and other psychiatric disorders are more vulnerable. For instance, more frequent heat waves and tropical nights can be physically demanding, especially for older people as well as infants and young children.

Furthermore, living in old-age poverty is an additional risk in relation to environmental impacts. This is also linked to a more frequent exposure to traffic and industry-related health impacts from noise and air pollutants, and more densely populated areas with fewer green and blue spaces. Further, people with lower socioeconomic status also tend to have fewer opportunities for exercise and recreation.

Older persons with disabilities and those in need of care are particularly vulnerable, because they can protect themselves less effectively and dependent on their social networks or, if living in institutions, on institutional disaster managements plans. The lack of a sufficient number of health and care professionals provides for additional risks for older persons in need of care.

Older persons with migration backgrounds and older refugees face additional risks given barriers in accessing timely information and orientation. Often this is combined with other grounds beyond age and refugee status. Older people without family support or a reliable social network are also at risk as they are less likely to receive timely information and support.

Overall, the question is difficult to reply given the complexity and variety of climate change-induced disasters.

Examples of good practices

One example of good practices for addressing the needs of older persons in preventing, mitigating and responding to climate change-related disasters is the above mentioned heat prevention plan of the City of Cologne.

In conclusion

In our view, a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons as comprehensive legally binding instrument would contribute to raising the awareness of how older persons, as a quickly growing population group, are feeling the consequences of climate change. In BAGSO's view, a Convention would also empower older persons to assert their rights and seek justice when their rights are violated.



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BAGSO – The voice of older people

BAGSO, the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations, represents the interests of older generations in Germany. It stands up for active, healthy and self-determined ageing in social security. BAGSO is an umbrella organisation of more than 120 civil society organisations that are run by or work for older people.