



Talking Points for Opening Remarks

Side event: Active ageing, social well-being and mental health in the Caribbean Wednesday 14th December, 1.00–2.15pm, Enrique Iglesias Room, ECLAC

Being physically and socially active is beneficial to health, including mental health and emotional well-being, throughout the life course. The World Health Organization has taken a leading role in the promotion of Active Ageing and their policy framework for Active Ageing was originally developed as a contribution to the Madrid World Assembly on Ageing in 2002. The WHO defined Active Ageing as the promotion of health, participation and security to extend healthy life expectancy and improve quality of life for all people as they age (WHO, 2002).

The links between physical inactivity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and between NCDs and activity limitations and disability are well known. Meanwhile the social relationships that we have with family and friends, and the quality and depth of these relationships, are equally important to our happiness, emotional well-being and mental health as we age.

Many people lead increasingly sedentary lifestyles as they get older. This is particularly true if their personal mobility has declined. This in turn affects their independence and their ability to remain socially active. Undertaking appropriate physical activity and exercise is important at all ages, including for older persons who may be frail or have functional limitations or disabilities. Exercise and mental stimulation are the best way to ward off physical and cognitive decline. There is even evidence that mental stimulation can delay in the onset of dementia.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are central to the relationship between lifestyle and later life health and well-being. Caribbean countries and territories are seeing an increasing disease burden attributable to non-communicable diseases, with the disease burden attributable to major categories of NCDs, including cardiovascular diseases, neoplasms, diabetes and kidney diseases, higher in the Caribbean than for the region as a whole.

Loneliness and isolation are also widespread problems among older persons, both among those that live alone and those that live with other family members. Underlying this isolation may be declining personal mobility, the loss of a spouse or friends, or concerns about personal security. The COVID-19 pandemic and mitigation measures which focused on limiting social contacts, especially with non-household members, likely exacerbated this problem.

Older persons' social participation also depends on the safety and accessibility of the built environment. Perceived and objectively high levels of crime and violence prevent older persons from participating in community life and affect individuals' overall well-being and mental health. The lack of accessible public transit is also a critical barrier for older persons in many Caribbean countries. On the other hand, accessible transportation (e.g. low-floor and wheelchair accessible buses) and public spaces with ramps and hand rails would help to maintain older persons' sense of independence and willingness to maintain social connections.

Many older persons requiring long-term care rely on the support of informal carers, primarily provided by family members, especially women, the burden on whom can be excessive. These informal carers play a crucial role in supporting the independence and autonomy of care recipients which in turn facilitates physical activity and social engagement. Long-term care systems need to integrate the care and support needs of both care recipients and their informal care providers (many of whom will be older persons themselves).

Caribbean governments are seeking to implement programmes to promote active ageing, social well-being and mental health. The National Assistance Board of Barbados recently launched an Elder Care Companion Programme under which companions trained in communication, mental health and social work visit older persons in their homes to support and maintain their emotional and psychosocial well-being. The Department of Community Development and Social Services in Saint Kitts and Nevis has launched the Seniors Enrichment Programme which organises activities for older persons with an emphasis on physical health and well-being, lifelong learning, skills development and social interaction. In Cuba, Saint Kitts and Nevis, the United States Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands, governments have implemented educational programmes for older persons whereby they can enrol and participate in courses offered at higher education institutions.

Biographical information about the three speakers

Teresa Orosa

Teresa Orosa (full name: Teresa Orosa Fraíz) is Professor of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Havana, Cuba, and has worked to promote education as an essential component of healthy ageing. Doctora Orosa has been the founder and leader of the University of the Third Age Programme in Cuba. This is an education programme for older persons in Cuba which has benefited thousands since it was founded more than 20 years ago. It is a programme based on the self-sustainable participation of older adult volunteers as an intrinsic part of university faculties, with classrooms in various urban and rural localities, and with actions that contribute to local development. It is now a nationwide programme with "Cátedras del Adulto Mayor" (roughly translated as "University Chairs for the Older Adult") now attached to all Cuban universities.

Douladel Willie-Tyndale

Douladel Willie-Tyndale is Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of Graduate Gerontology Programmes at the University of the West Indies (UWI). She has a Doctor of Philosophy in Public Health and is the Team Lead for Research and Training at the Mona Ageing and Wellness Centre, UWI. Her research interests include social participation and ageing, the built environment and older adults, and the sexual and genitourinary health of older adults.

Jennifer Rouse

Jennifer Rouse is a Gerontologist who for 15 years was Director of the Division of Ageing in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services of Trinidad and Tobago. Since her retirement from that role in 2018 she continues to be an advocate for the interests of older persons and for healthy ageing, appearing frequently in national media to discuss topics such as elder abuse, the impact of COVID-19 on older persons, and digital skills. Jennifer's first career was in Accounts for the national airline (BWIA) where she worked for 20 years before taking voluntary separation in 1995 and deciding to go to college for the first time at the age of 43. She attended the University of Maryland between 1996 and 2004 graduating with a Doctorate in Public Policy in Ageing.