

International initiatives for the benefit of senior citizens

Streszczenie

Prognozy demograficzne wskazują jednoznacznie, iż zagadnienia z zakresu starzenia się ludności wykazują tendencje wzrostowe i uchodzą za poważny, postępujący problem demograficzny zarówno w skali światowej, europejskiej, jak i poszczególnych państw. Należy zwrócić uwagę na fakt, iż kraje Europy Zachodniej posiadają ogromne doświadczenie w sferze omawianej problematyki ze względu na to, że kwestie starzenia się ich społeczeństw wystąpiły znacznie wcześniej aniżeli w Polsce. Wysokie wskaźniki populacji osób w wieku poprodukcyjnym przyczyniają się do tego, że wyrażenie „Stary Kontynent” nabiera nowego znaczenia. W obliczu procesu starzenia się ludności istotne znaczenie mają licznie funkcjonujące podmioty działające w obronie interesów ludzi starszych wiekiem. Ich działalność sprowadza się przede wszystkim do zadań związanych z ochroną praw oraz zapobieganiu marginalizacji seniorów w różnych sferach życia społecznego. Dodatkowo w większości poszczególnych państw funkcjonują lokalne ugrupowania działające na rzecz osób w trzeciej tercji życia. Warto podkreślić, iż pokolenie trzeciej generacji może wnieść wiele korzyści w relacjach międzypokoleniowych poprzez wiedzę oraz nabywane przez całe życie bogate doświadczenie. Przejawia się to przede wszystkim w wykazywanej aktywności obywatelskiej a także wśród pełnionych przez seniorów ról społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe:

proces starzenia, jakość życia, organizacje międzynarodowe

Abstract

Population projections clearly indicate that issues concerning population ageing are increasing and pose a serious, continuous, demographic problem for individual states as well as Europe and the world. It should be noted that Western European countries have vast experience in the field of the problems in question, due to the fact that issues of population ageing had occurred much earlier there than they did in Poland. A high ratio of people of retirement age contributes to the fact that the expression “Old Continent” takes on a new meaning. In the face of the population ageing process, numerous entities which protect the interests of the elderly play an important role. They focus primarily on protecting the rights and preventing the marginalization of senior citizens in various spheres of social life. Furthermore, local groups promoting the well-being of the elderly operate in most countries. It is worth noting that the older generation can bring many benefits to intergenerational relationships through their knowledge and rich life experience. This manifests itself primarily in civic activity and social roles taken on and performed by senior citizens.

Key words:

population ageing, quality of life, international organizations

Population ageing in particular societies at a global, European and national level, including Poland, is considered to be a serious demographic problem. The topic of population ageing, which is the result of a significant increase in the average duration of human life, is a multifaceted issue. More and more often this topic is becoming the subject of public debate. Population projections clearly indicate that issues concerning population ageing are increasing and pose a serious, continuous, demographic problem for individual states, Europe and the world. Due to the aforementioned multidimensional nature of the problem and various consequences of the irreversible phenomenon of the increasing number of people of retirement age, as well as increasing life expectancy, this topic raises a lot of interest within academic circles representing disciplines as wide-ranging as gerontology, social policy, demography, economics, sociology, psychology, medicine and public health. The phenomenon of population ageing manifests itself in almost every sphere of life. What is especially noteworthy is its impact on the economy, society and politics. As a consequence of this issue, organisations and other entities working for the benefit of senior citizens are becoming increasingly significant.

Their main objective is to protect the rights of older people and to prevent discrimination against them in many areas of social life. Moreover, they strive first and foremost to change the approach to the issues of old age and the ageing process; to counteract the wide-spread cult of youth. In addition, many organizations help make it possible to meet the various needs of older people. As Zofia Szarota points out, during this demographic revolution, various associations and federations have been formed for the purpose of preventing situations in which the age of an individual is a factor of social, cultural, professional and economic marginalization (Szarota 2004b).

In the twentieth century, the problem of the social exclusion of senior citizens has been recognized by international organizations, the public and the governments of developed countries. Since the 80s, actions have been taken to tackle stereotypes and improper attitudes towards the elderly (Bombol and Słaby 2011).

It is obvious that old age boundaries are being systematically moved forward, as in the past a 60-year-old man was considered old. People want to be young for as long as possible and do not want to live passively. In Western countries, this is expressed in different forms of social activity, organized leisure and recreation, in an explosion of self-help groups and in participation in political movements for the benefit and recognition of the older generation (Synak 2000).

The American *Gray Panthers*, founded by Meggi Kuhn in 1970, is considered the most famous organization for senior citizens in the world. The organization has set itself four main objectives:

- to promote positive attitudes towards older people and combat negative stereotypes associated with old age;
- to expose ageism and abuse against the elderly;

- to influence policy in support of the rights of the elderly;
- to organize local “nests” of the association in order to achieve a faster resolution of senior citizens’ problems in their local communities.

Estimated at about fifty thousand members, the organization has been dealing mainly with age-related discrimination in employment and the problem of medicinal abuse, and has been fighting for the participation of older people in the decision-making process. It has organised demonstrations, pickets and lobbies for better health care for the elderly, as well as fairer presentation of senior citizens in the media. It has published programmes and books. The *Gray Panthers’* rhetoric sounds as if it were aimed at removing age barriers, but the association’s efforts seem to be directed towards providing rights for both young and old, albeit mostly for the elderly (Halicki 2000).

Among American organizations defending the interests of retired people the *American Association of Retired People*, founded in 1958 by Ethel Percy Andrus, is also noteworthy. According to its mission statement, it is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization for people aged 50 and over, created to improve the quality of life for all senior citizens. It offers a wide range of unique benefits, special products and services for its members. Currently, the AARP is considered the most powerful and well-organized lobby for the elderly in the United States (<http://www.aarp.org>). In the sphere of social policy it is the most influential pressure group. It devises information campaigns, organizes meetings for older people with similar interests and provides advice in many areas, ranging from taxes to health (Kowalak 1996).

Two organizations of global significance merit particular attention:

– The *International Federation on Ageing*, which was established in 1973 as a United Nations agency based in Montreal. The federation launches initiatives concerned with establishing laws and rules regulating the situation of older people in social and civic life, as senior citizens should have a guarantee of full participation in the political and cultural life of their communities. The IFA’s mission is to create positive change for older people around the world by stimulating, collecting, analysing and disseminating information on the laws, rules and practices that improve the quality of life of older people (<http://www.ifa-fiv.org>).

– *HelpAge International* is a global network of non-profit organizations working on national, regional and local levels. It was established in 1983 and brings together members from 49 countries worldwide. It mainly operates in developing states, with the mission of working with older people and for their benefit in order to achieve a sustainable improvement of the quality of their lives, as well as seeking to ensure that the voice of older people, especially those in a situation of disadvantage, is taken into account (Szarota 2002a).

Furthermore, the following European organizations should be noted:

– The *European Federation of the Elderly*, established in 1962 in Luxembourg. The aim of the federation is to promote intergenerational solidarity and to maintain older

people's self-reliance and independence, to support the participation of the elderly in the decision-making process, and to give support to the development of democracy and the promotion of self-help. It makes efforts to improve the lives of older people, attempts to prevent discrimination associated with old age, and strives to ensure the financial security of the elderly. EURAG's work is based on work-groups and committees considering the specific problems of the older generation as well as drafting and promoting proposals and motions in the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the UN, the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organisation. Moreover, its tasks include coordination, cooperation and exchange of views with experts and service organizations, self-help groups as well as individual people, and organizing international conferences for the elderly addressing specific age-related issues (Szarota 2010c).

– *Federation Internationale des Associations des Personnes Agees*, based in Paris, was founded in 1980. Its mission is to raise awareness that ageing is not only a demographic problem, but a social one as well, and that older people are willing to participate fully in society. The FIAPA's objectives can be implemented in each country and at an international level through the establishment of action programmes for member organizations in regard to family, health and the involvement of senior citizens in work for the society. The association organizes evaluation seminars covering comprehensive projects and achievements as well as meetings with local organizations in the country in which they operate (Szarota 2010c).

Councils of seniors, where the elderly can get involved in political activities, are also noteworthy. Such councils are mainly engaged in the discussion of decisions related to the elderly and in lobbying for friendly solutions for said age group. Local authorities in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden resort to the aid of e.g. advisory councils which is comprised of senior citizens. The first Councils of Seniors were established in Germany in the 1970s. Their growth peaked in the 1980s and 1990s – e.g. in 1995 there were 500 Councils of Seniors, and 750 just a year later. In Denmark, in 1980, for 270 magistrates (municipalities) there were only four Councils of Seniors, but by 1997 their number had increased to 200 (Borowska and Dobranowska-Wittels 2007).

In Poland, in turn, only a few Councils of Seniors have been formed in larger cities. By the end of 2012, 27 Councils of Seniors had been established, but their number is constantly increasing (Nowicka 2013). For example, in the Silesian voivodeship, only two municipal Councils of Seniors exist. The first was constituted in 2010. It operates in Gliwice as an advisory body to the local authorities, giving opinions on the quality of life of older people. The purpose of the Council is to represent older people's organizations, diagnose problems, and to present the situation of senior citizens to the mayor and committees of the city council, together with conclusions and proposed solutions. The assembly

gives its opinions on the resolutions concerning senior citizens and collaborates with institutions dealing with similar topics (<http://www.wolontariat.gcop.gliwice.pl>).

The second Council of Seniors was initiated by the mayor of Jastrzębie-Zdrój as an advisory body dealing with the problems of the elderly. The purpose of the Council is to work with the mayor of the city and help realize the potential and maximize the time of older people, promote culture and education in said social group, provide advice and submit proposals for the development and benefit of the elderly (Syjut 2013).

The many consequences of the increase in number of people of retirement age affects society as a whole, as well as individuals. In the face of population ageing, numerous organizations and associations for the elderly – not only on an international, but also on a national and local level – have been formed. Their main goal is to protect the rights and to prevent the marginalization of retired people in all spheres of social life. The knowledge and extensive life experience of the elderly may be beneficial for inter-generational relationships. This may be frequently observed in the civic activity and social roles of senior citizens.

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