

Ageing and Well-Being



The University of Geneva addresses a challenge for the individuals and for the world

From 1980 till now, the number of people aged 60 and more went from some 380 million to more than 760 million. And the United-Nations projections predict 2 billion by 2050. Those figures are often used to provoke fear. As a matter of fact, since the world population as a whole will continue to increase, in the mid of the 21st century, elderly will represent 15 to 18 percents of our planet's inhabitants, with peaks until 28/30 percents in the most affected countries. Ageing will obviously transform our societies, but not necessarily break them. It will require a considerable effort of adaptation from not only States, but also from families and individuals.

The University of Geneva is proud to have welcomed in 1972 the first geriatric hospital of the European continent, impulse by Professor Junod, a pioneer of a humanistic approach of medicine for the elderly, someone who considered that we should not only "add years to life but also life to years". For over more than 20 years now, the Centre for the Interdisciplinary Study of Gerontology and Vulnerability (acronym

CIGEV in French) defends the position that maintaining, or even increasing, individual's well-being and the social ties must be the objectives of all the answers to the ageing challenges. This is indeed what the European Union validated when 2012 was proclaimed year of the active ageing and intergenerational relations, with an emphasis on citizenship and social participation. Being positive is highly valuable but it must not hide that old age remains the period of life when losses exceed gains, where the elderly endures bereavements and the perspective of death, has to adapt his/her life style and personal identity as an old person, and to face the threat of losing his/her autonomy and becoming dependent.

This is to study those complex human processes that CIGEV developed an internationally recognized expertise in survey methods, so to hear the voice of the elderly themselves, to objectively observe their living conditions but also to capture their subjective feeling. Such ambition imposes an interdisciplinary perspective, a dialogue between social sciences, psychology, medicine, but also law and ethics. It is with this skill set that CIGEV has become one of the initiator of the National Centre of Competences in Research LIVES, which is an alliance of several Swiss universities. LIVES studies vulnerabilities across the life course and, of course, resistances and frailties in old age are an important component.

Beyond the boarder of Switzerland, a worldwide challenge like ageing requires the engagement of an international science, which is an essential part of the excellence cultivated in the University of Geneva. Among the developed countries, a network devoted to gerontological researches is rooted in the strategic partnership that engage together the Universities of Geneva, Montreal and Brussels. This group includes also Western Ontario, the Spanish Council for Scientific Research, the Swedish University of Umea and its "Aging and Living Conditions" cluster, and soon other centres in France, Japan and Korea. As a second step, this network will have to imperatively include research teams from the South, working in developing countries and emergent giants where the population will age far before a complete escape from poverty! To face this quite peculiar challenge, it will be crucial to organize intelligent transfers of knowledge and experiences, from the North to the South, but also from the South to the North. The University of Geneva will be a prominent actor in this dialogue to come.

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