

Age-friendly social policies and smart urban ecosystems. Stage of knowledge

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A brief history of age-friendly social policies

The "age friendly" concept has gained international recognition through the policies and guidelines developed by the "World Health Organization" (WHO). At the first United Nations (UN) World Assembly on Aging in 1982, affiliated countries endorsed the Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging, the first major international declaration on aging, by launching its policy framework on active aging (Resolution 47/86), which includes eight age-friendly dimensions: outdoor spaces and public buildings, transport, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, community support and health services (WHO, 2007a). . The goal was to "optimize opportunities for health, participation and security to improve quality of life as people age." WHO sought to extend the ideological approach to aging beyond physical health to all meaningful engagements – social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic, to create a framework for assessing the compatibility of the environment for the elderly and to monitor the progress of public policies in this direction. Since then, the framework has been used as a basis for developing age-friendly public social policies.

Closely related to the age-friendly concept is the concept of active ageing. Thus, an effective response to the aging phenomenon is based on a large-scale intervention at the level of public policies, involving various public entities at local, regional and central level - a holistic approach - in close collaboration with other interested parties - including by involving civil society. The challenges presented through this cooperation should be considered by policy makers in the design and implementation of policies that promote active aging, catalyzing efforts to improve the physical and social environment for the elderly (Fernandes et al., 2021).

The WHO proposed that policies, services and structures in an age-friendly city, which are linked to the physical and social environment, should be designed to support and enable older people to 'age actively'.

In the 2019 Declaration on Policies for Building a Better Future for Regions, Cities and Rural Areas, OECD countries considered aging is one of the megatrends causing profound changes to regions (OECD, 2019). Population aging certainly has an impact on the quality of life in local communities (urban and rural alike) and dictates the directions of economic and social policy transformations at national, regional and local levels.

Population aging is seen as a determining factor for the development of programs for sustainable, smart and inclusive local development (ENRD, 2018) Solutions should be planned in an integrated way and their fundamental assumptions must reveal the demographic challenges and opportunities offered by the revolution technological.

With a percentage of elderly population that represent a considerable part of the total population, which increases considerably every year, public policies in Romania began to pay attention to this aging phenomenon, which took shape in 2014, with the publication of the National Strategy for the promotion of active aging and the protection of elderly people for the period 2015 - 2020. However, as far as we know, there is a lack of studies focused on how the Romanian local public administration and other interested parties approach the phenomenon of active aging. After this strategy's plan of measures, that was not implemented, another strategy was not developed or implemented after 2020.

The concept of age-friendly cities and communities (AFCC). Brief introduction

The topic of age-friendly cities and communities emerged as a result of a set of policy initiatives launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the 1990s and early 2000s. A central theme running through these policy initiatives is the notion of "active ageing" (WHO, 2002), previously discussed, which refers to the idea that older people should be able to continue to participate in social, cultural, spiritual, economic and civic issues. This idea, in turn, led to the launch of the WHO Global Age-Friendly Cities project (WHO, 2007a). In many cities around the world, focus groups have been held to identify those factors that make urban environments 'age-friendly'. The project defined an "age-friendly city" that encourages "active aging by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security to improve quality of life as people age" (WHO, 2007a; Remillard-Boilard et al., 2021; van Hoof, Marston, et al., 2021). The program launched in 2010: "The Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities", sought to encourage the implementation of policy recommendations.

The Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) movement has inspired people around the world to imagine ways in which localities can better support the health and well-being of age 3 residents as they age. About 15 years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007) described age-friendly cities as follows: "In an age-friendly community, policies, services and structures related to the physical and social environment are designed to support and enable older people to 'age actively' – that is, live safely, enjoy health and continue to participate fully in society" (p. 5).

More recently, researchers have defined AFCC initiatives as "deliberate and distinct efforts among stakeholders from multiple sectors within a defined and typically local geographic area to make social and/or physical environments more conducive to adults' health, well-being, and ability to aging in place and in the community" (Greenfield et al., 2015, p. 192).

Since the mid-2000s, the promotion of AFCC has attracted the interest of various actors at several levels: governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, researchers and the industrial environment. WHO has played a vital role in outlining the age-friendly agenda or framework.

From incremental changes to transformative changes, AFCC policies and those who promote them aim to improve social built environments and services to address the challenges and opportunities of aging in the community.

Despite the tremendous growth of the AFCC movement over the last decade (WHO, 2018), the systematic development of knowledge on initiatives to promote policies of age-friendly cities and communities has developed more slowly (Greenfield and Buffel, 2022, p. 163), and initiatives from our country are even rarer. Worldwide, there is an expanding literature on the different aspects of an age-friendly community and their importance for the well-being of seniors, but in the Romanian literature this theme is not sufficiently developed, there are significant gaps in knowledge about how to work, at the social policies needed to change the environment and systems to better meet the needs of people as they age.

In order for AFCC social policies to have a greater impact in Romania, we aim to critically analyze research on the practices of individuals and organizations in their work to translate objectives, assessments, plans, tools and commitments into action and impact. Finally, the aim is to describe the contexts that present challenges and opportunities for these efforts, with a focus on social policy.

Although the AFCC initiative has been well received, it requires local partners to promote the project and strengthen the community, which can be challenging. Diverse partnerships between government institutions, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and academic institutions are also critical to success. At the same time, feedback from seniors is extremely important. Starting from the framework established by the WHO and the set of indicators for monitoring and evaluating progress in improving the adaptability of the urban environment, the basic indicators were structured around three key principles: equity, accessibility of the physical environment and inclusion of the social environment (WHO, 2015). In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a city, older people will describe how the WHO checklist of characteristics (WHO, 2007a) matches their own experience of the city's characteristics. They should play a role in suggesting changes and implementing and monitoring improvements (WHO, 2007), as in order to create age-appropriate living environments, it is of the utmost importance to involve older people in the design of their living environment, especially because the importance given to old age can vary greatly (van Hoof et al., 2022).

In a first phase, WHO led a research project that examined the experiences of older people living in urban environments (WHO, 2007) and subsequently established the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (Global Network; WHO, 2018). Starting with just 12 communities in 2010, this network reached a membership of 1,333 cities and communities in 47 countries in 2022 (WHO, fa), covering more than 298 million people worldwide. The global network connected cities and communities around the world to facilitate the exchange of information, knowledge, practices and experiences to improve physical infrastructure (housing, outdoor spaces and buildings), social environments (opportunities for social participation) and provision of services (community and health services, transport).

As for the Global Network, barriers to dissemination included language skills, resources, and communication among members. Africa is the only region without network members as of 2020 (<https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/who-network/>). Network membership is not a designation, but reflects a member's commitment to making progress

toward the goal of becoming more age-friendly. The map below shows that no city in Romania has joined the AFCC Global Network.

Figure no. 1. AFCC Global Network



Source: WHO, (2022), Available at: <https://apps.who.int/agefriendlycitiesmap/>, accessed on 19.06.2022.

The growth of the network has been stimulated by the involvement of organizations from around the world, including the International Federation on Aging (2022), AARP (fa), and AGE Platform Europe (fa).

The United Nations (UN) Initiative - Decade of Healthy Aging 2021-2030, a global collaboration aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, further strengthens the goal of creating age-friendly environments to promote healthy ageing. This initiative brings together international agencies, governments, civil society, academia, the media and others in the private sector to improve the lives of older people, their families and the communities in which they live. The Decade addresses four areas of action, one of which is the creation of "age-friendly environments". This field of action involves the promotion of physical, social and economic environments that are good places to "live, work and age" (WHO, 2020, p. 9). The framework emphasizes the importance of community-centred approaches to improve policies, systems and environments in support of healthy and equitable aging (Keating, 2022; Dogra et al., 2022) – an issue that has been further accentuated by the pandemic. COVID-19 (Phillipson et al., 2021; Zingmark et al., 2022; Koivunen et al., 2022).

Attention to AFCC is also increasing in academic research, Torku and colleagues (2021) systematically reviewed the AFCC literature up to 2018 providing evidence of the magnitude of the increase in research volume in this area. Their review found an accelerating trend in the number of AFCC publications each year, particularly since 2014, and documented a collection of articles in four sub-areas:

Taken together, the academic work on AFCC has recorded a variety of achievements. Such achievements include a greater recognition in urban and regional planning of the implications of an aging population, particularly with regard to the (re)design of outdoor spaces, housing and transport (van Hoof et al., 2021; van Hoof, 2020). The AFCC movement has also inspired campaigns to change societal narratives about aging and to reduce the stereotypes, prejudices, and forms of discrimination people experience based on their age (Remillard-Boilard et al., 2021). Moreover, AFCC's efforts have fostered new models and community-based approaches to promote the active involvement of diverse groups of older people in the co-production of age-friendly research, policy and practice (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2022; Remillard-Boilard et al., 2017).

Finally, the AFCC movement has expanded the boundaries of the field of aging and advocated support for interdisciplinary work (Fulmer et al., 2020), linking fields such as urban design, architecture, sociology, social policy, social gerontology, community development, public health, healthcare and others.

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