



## Realising the potential of digital transition for healthy ageing in the EU



**Dorota Tomalak Marco di Donato Valentina Polylas**

There is no denying that Europeans are ageing fast. Today, 20 % of the population is above the age of 65, and by 2050 this will reach 30 %. It is projected that in 20 years there will be close to half a million centenarians in the EU-27 and that the overall share of the oldest old (those aged 80 and over) will reach 13 %.

Attesting to the progress in modern medicine and enabled by several peaceful decades of harmonious social, economic and political development, European longevity is a clear sign of more widespread well-being and equity. Yet this privilege of long life comes with a price tag: healthcare systems, social care services, economic growth and financial stability are affected.

Harnessing the potential of longer life requires political reflection and changes in how we approach our lifespans. A 'silver revolution' is called for, not only in health and social matters, but covering a full range of policy areas at local, regional, national and European levels. Be it rural policy, taxation, workforce management, migration, vocational training, pension schemes or cancer prevention, the decision-makers must transform 'expenditure' into 'investment', connecting all the necessary dots to extend healthy life expectancy.

Living longer is good – **living these additional years in good health is the ultimate goal**. Digitalisation can make this possible. Birgitta Sacrédeus, Member of

Dalarna Regional Council and Head of the European Committee of the Regions interregional group on health and well-being, wrote to regional and national governments, encouraging them to 'embrace the opportunities of e-Health and digitalisation as tools and to step up their efforts to modernise health services for all ages, using digital innovation to reduce health inequalities and improve access to care'.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated beyond

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doubt **how much we need resilient health services** and how they need a solid e-infrastructure to benefit from the latest innovations and to stay connected, fast and efficient.

What works for health systems at large works for patients too: how often people need to book an appointment just to renew their prescription, how frustrating it is to wait in the queue when a simple online enquiry would suffice, how dispersed our medical records are...

**Getting older is a fact of life; however, the way in which we age depends on a multitude of factors. While many seem to emphasise only the challenges that ageing brings, we should equally harness the opportunities: digital innovation is a crucial lever in helping us stay healthy for longer and allow practical and affordable assistance later in life when we depend on it.**

*Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography*

Driving digitalisation forward does not mean replacing human connection with screens. As demonstrated by countless projects developed by regions on the ground, it is about making space for meaningful interaction by streamlining processes and the technology behind them, for example making medical records available to doctors on screen, enabling them to spend more time diagnosing their patients rather than trying to piece together their medical history during the appointment.

However, the pace of digitalisation remains uneven across different policy fields. **Of all the changes brought about by technology, healthcare is not one of them quite yet.** As it stands, healthcare systems are unable to deliver the needed amount of qualitative, efficient healthcare services today, let alone in the future. Innovation is the key to a healthy and active lifestyle for all age groups' explains Piret Hirv, project manager on the Horizon Europe-funded Innovation Networks for Scaling Active and Healthy Ageing. This project aims to develop a framework that will help build international networks between local governments, healthcare providers and suppliers, allowing access to healthcare solutions and promoting active and healthy ageing. The goal is to enable innovation in healthcare by addressing national and international barriers.

Dismantling such barriers and closing the investment gap is the area of importance to local and regional authorities. In its **Active and Healthy Ageing**

**opinion**, published in October 2019, the European Committee of the Regions highlights that 'local and regional authorities play a pivotal role in designing and scaling up innovations that make life easier for older people. (...) Local and regional authorities across the Union can thus turn the "demographic tsunami" into a real opportunity to improve services to their citizens while also stimulating new jobs opportunities'. The European Commission concurs: 'to enhance the quality of care and wellbeing of the elderly, the Commission is working with Member States to reform their health and care systems with support from the Technical Support Instrument,' says Raluca Painter, Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support.

Turning the narrative **from 'ticking ageing bomb' into 'new horizons and opportunities'** is what Europe needs to realise the full potential of its demographic structure and its cutting-edge technologies. Transitioning towards more accessible, digital and interconnected services and systems requires all hands on deck and a clear EU vision of the future in which we will want to age.

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