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Scientific articles

**Inclusion and citizenship in a society of longevity: up and down the ladder, from universal principles to methodological challenges. The case of citizen design workshops in France**

*Inclusión y ciudadanía en una sociedad longeva: avances y retrocesos, desde principios universales hasta desafíos metodológicos. El caso de los talleres de diseño ciudadano en Francia*

*Inclusão e cidadania em uma sociedade de longevidade: subindo e descendo a escada, dos princípios universais aos desafios metodológicos. O caso das oficinas de design cidadão na França*

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## Abstract

The global demographic transition presents challenges and opportunities for fostering inclusive societies that promote active citizenship and lifelong participation of older persons. Guided by the United Nations' Principles for Older Persons (1991) and UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), this article emphasizes the issue of older adults' inclusion in decision making processes within the context of participative democracies. It also explores interactions between older citizens, policymakers, and civil society, analyzing the conditions that enable participatory governance and the role of key stakeholders, including community organizations.

The article examines Citizen Design Workshops (CDW), first implemented in the eastern region of France, and later expanded to other cities, some of which are engaged in the WHO's Age-Friendly Cities initiative. The CDW methodology repositions older individuals in local decision-making processes, recognizing their diverse experiences and needs.

Beyond aging-related issues, this research considers how CDW methodologies can address broader issues on the role researchers in inclusive research and their potential contribution to social inclusion. The approach specifically targets specific groups often excluded from local decision-making.

Findings suggest that participatory methodologies, embedded in gerontological engineering, can create a more inclusive and dynamic model of civic engagement across the life course. This approach aligns with broader efforts to develop age-inclusive public policies, ensuring older populations are recognized as key actors in shaping their communities.

**Key words:** ageing and sustainable citizenship, lifecourse approach to civic engagement, participatory methodologies, gerontological engineering, rights of older people.

## Resumen

La transición demográfica global presenta desafíos y oportunidades para fomentar sociedades inclusivas que promuevan la ciudadanía activa y la participación a lo largo de la vida de las



personas mayores. Guiado por los Principios de las Naciones Unidas en favor de las Personas de Edad (1991) y la Declaración Universal sobre la Diversidad Cultural de la UNESCO (2001), este artículo enfatiza la inclusión de las personas mayores en los procesos de toma de decisiones en el contexto de las democracias participativas. También explora las interacciones entre las personas mayores, los responsables políticos y la sociedad civil, analizando las condiciones que posibilitan la gobernanza participativa y el papel de los actores clave, incluidas las organizaciones comunitarias.

El artículo examina los Talleres de Diseño Ciudadano (TCD), implementados inicialmente en la región este de Francia y posteriormente expandidos a otras ciudades, algunas de las cuales participan en la iniciativa Ciudades Amigables con las Personas Mayores de la OMS. La metodología de los TCD reubica a las personas mayores en los procesos locales de toma de decisiones, reconociendo sus diversas experiencias y necesidades.

Más allá de las cuestiones relacionadas con el envejecimiento, esta investigación considera cómo las metodologías de los TCD pueden abordar cuestiones más amplias sobre el papel de los investigadores en la investigación inclusiva y su posible contribución a la inclusión social. El enfoque se dirige específicamente a grupos específicos que a menudo quedan excluidos de la toma de decisiones local.

Findings suggest that participatory methodologies, embedded in gerontological engineering, can create a more inclusive and dynamic model of civic engagement across the life course. This approach aligns with broader efforts to develop age-inclusive public policies, ensuring older populations are recognized as key actors in shaping their communities.

**Palabras clave:** envejecimiento y ciudadanía sostenible, enfoque del curso de vida para el compromiso cívico, metodologías participativas, ingeniería gerontológica, derechos de las personas mayores.

## Resumo

A transição demográfica global apresenta desafios e oportunidades para o fomento de sociedades inclusivas que promovam a cidadania ativa e a participação vitalícia dos idosos.



Orientado pelos Princípios das Nações Unidas para a Pessoa Idosa (1991) e pela Declaração Universal sobre Diversidade Cultural da UNESCO (2001), este artigo enfatiza a questão da inclusão dos idosos nos processos de tomada de decisão no contexto das democracias participativas. Também explora as interações entre cidadãos idosos, formuladores de políticas e a sociedade civil, analisando as condições que permitem a governança participativa e o papel das principais partes interessadas, incluindo organizações comunitárias.

The article examines Citizen Design Workshops (CDW), first implemented in the eastern region of France, and later expanded to other cities, some of which are engaged in the WHO's Age-Friendly Cities initiative. The CDW methodology repositions older individuals in local decision-making processes, recognizing their diverse experiences and needs.

Beyond aging-related issues, this research considers how CDW methodologies can address broader issues on the role researchers in inclusive research and their potential contribution to social inclusion. The approach specifically targets specific groups often excluded from local decision-making.

Além das questões relacionadas ao envelhecimento, esta pesquisa considera como as metodologias de CDW podem abordar questões mais amplas sobre o papel dos pesquisadores em pesquisas inclusivas e sua potencial contribuição para a inclusão social. A abordagem visa especificamente grupos específicos frequentemente excluídos da tomada de decisões locais.

Os resultados sugerem que metodologias participativas, inseridas na engenharia gerontológica, podem criar um modelo mais inclusivo e dinâmico de engajamento cívico ao longo do ciclo de vida. Essa abordagem se alinha a esforços mais amplos para desenvolver políticas públicas inclusivas para a idade, garantindo que as populações mais velhas sejam reconhecidas como atores-chave na formação de suas comunidades.

**Palavras-chave:** envelhecimento e cidadania sustentável, abordagem de curso de vida para engajamento cívico, metodologias participativas, engenharia gerontológica, direitos dos idosos.

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## Introduction

The contemporary global demographic transition presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities for fostering inclusive societies that uphold the principles of active citizenship and participation throughout the life course. As articulated in the United Nations' Principles for Older Persons in 1991 and further developed in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2001, inclusion and social participation are fundamental to the realization of human rights and social justice in an aging world. These frameworks emphasize that older adults are often represented as recipients of social policies but less frequently shown as active contributors to shaping their communities and local governance structures.

This presentation explores the theoretical foundations of inclusion, citizenship, and lifelong participation in the two first chapters, followed in the last chapter by an empirical examination of Citizen Design Workshops (CDW) conducted in the city of Metz (Grand Est, France) and later expanded to seven other French cities, some of which are strongly engaged in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Age-Friendly Cities initiative. The CDW method was designed to reposition older individuals representing diverse experiences and aging trajectories within local decision-making processes. This section focuses on the interactions between older people, public decision-makers (elected officials, professionals), and civil society actors in shaping public action. It interrogates the conditions under which participatory dynamics emerge and the role of different stakeholders, from social centers to community-based associations.

Finally, the discussion extends beyond aging issues to explore how the CDW participatory method can be adapted to address broader socio-economic challenges at national and international levels. Inspired by observations of social design work conducted in Quebec, particularly by the experience of Social Design by Philippe Gauthier, Citizen Design was later developed and experimented in France in order to integrate aging populations in all their diversity. This approach is part of a broader participatory democracy framework, with a particular focus on involving groups that are often marginalized or even excluded from local decision-making dynamics.

These workshops illustrate how participatory methodologies can be embedded within gerontological engineering, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic model of civic engagement across the life course.



## **I. Inclusion, Citizenship, and Participation in a Lifelong Perspective**

### **1.1 From demographic transitions to democratic challenges**

In the context of contemporary global debates on human rights, the demographic transition opens new avenues of concerns and issues. This paradigm is particularly pertinent given the demographic transitions characterized by an aging global population. According to the United Nations estimates, the global population of individuals aged 65 and over is expected to more than double, increasing from 761 million in 2021 to 1.6 billion by 2050 (UN, 2021). By the mid-2030s, the number of people aged 80 and older is projected to reach 265 million, surpassing the number of infants (UN, 2021). This demographic shift underscores the critical challenge of fostering societal commitment to an increasing number of older adults, ensuring their active participation and inclusion within the civic sphere.

The progress in longevity has not only extended the horizon of death and increased the number of centenarians and very old individuals. Certainly, it has transformed the actual lifespan experienced by each person. It is estimated that one in two children born in 2030 could become a centenarian. France currently has 20,000 centenarians, and according to estimates, this number could be ten times higher by 2060 (Blanpain & Chardon, 2010). However, beyond the more frequent access to old age and its contribution to the aging of the population, longer life expectancy profoundly transforms the entire process of growing and aging, as well as the social significance of different life stages and interactions between age groups.

Thinking about longevity and its implications, beyond old age itself, requires breaking down rigid age categories and moving away from a static conception of age and aging to a life-course approach. This perspective calls for an examination of the new ways in which social time is distributed across the entire lifespan - between education, work, personal time, and care for others - as the extension of life introduces a new temporal framework. It also challenges current social protection systems, questioning how societies manage social risks, security, and long-term welfare over an extended lifespan. In short, increased life expectancy among adults generates profound societal and individual transformations (Guillemand & Mascova, 2017).



In this context, demographic transition, characterized by longer life expectancy and aging populations, presents both opportunities and challenges for societies worldwide. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes the principle of "leaving no one behind", by integrating older populations into policy discourses on inclusion and participation (United Nations, 2015).

As life expectancy increases, ethical dilemmas arise regarding age discrimination and opportunities within the labor market but also regarding healthcare access, social life and end-of-life choices. Inclusion is framed not just as adding years to life, but improving the quality of those years, ensuring no group is left behind. Ensuring equal access to longevity is a key social justice challenge, requiring policies that mitigate disparities in health, economic security, and social participation. Health technologies should enhance quality of life, not just extend lifespan, reinforcing the importance of ethical considerations in medical advancements. According to UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005), the elderly individuals must have autonomy in healthcare decisions, yet many face medical paternalism. Longevity must be accompanied by dignity, ensuring that extended life expectancy does not translate into prolonged suffering. Therefore, the 2019 UNESCO "Report on Health and Social Justice" also highlights that Sustainable citizenship must address these inequalities through inclusive health policies that prioritize well-being over mere survival. Sustainable citizenship must extend beyond economic and political rights to include health equity and personal autonomy.

Demographic transition is reshaping intergenerational relationships, requiring new approaches to cooperation between younger and older generations. The increasing social fractures between age groups, exacerbated by unequal resource distribution and policy biases, more and more often appear as a challenge for democracies. The recent pension reform in France carried out in 2023 brought to light vivid debates on income levels and the well-being of different age groups (Gannon & al., 2023). According to the UN Resolution "Promotion of Social Integration through Social Inclusion" (2021), governments will have to address issues of intergenerational conflicts over pensions, healthcare, and job opportunities in the next decade. UNESCO's report "Unlocking the Potential of Family and Intergenerational Learning" (2020) also recommends policies that bridge generational divides, ensuring that knowledge, experiences, and responsibilities are shared across age groups.



## **1.2 Towards a "sustainable citizenship across the lifecourse"?**

As global aging accelerates at an unprecedented pace, the ongoing demographic transition has profound implications for this objective and a renewed commitment to inclusive governance and participatory democracy. From the perspective of active and sustainable citizenship, it raises critical issues regarding social inclusion, economic participation, intergenerational solidarity, and rights protection. Drawing on UNESCO's reports on inclusive societies, lifelong learning, and social justice, as well as the 2020 Global Report on Ageing and UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda, this argument explores how demographic shifts challenge traditional models of citizenship and necessitate structural adaptations.

We open debate on the different dimension of what we coin as "sustainable citizenship" in a lifelong perspective. We examine both theoretical and concrete path to foster older peoples' engagement in democratic processes and social inclusion as a result of a longstanding process commencing from early childhood socialization and persisting throughout the life course. This concept emphasizes the necessity of embedding democratic values and inclusive practices from the onset of social development, thereby ensuring the continuous exercise of citizenship rights and responsibilities across the lifespan.

We introduce the concept of "sustainable citizenship" as a lifelong, dynamic and regenerating process that encompasses democratic engagement and social inclusion from early childhood through old age until the last moments of existence. This conceptual perspective aligns with the UNESCO "Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow" (1972), which posits that citizenship is not a static status, but an evolving engagement shaped by continuous education, participation, and societal integration. Sustainable citizenship implies the removal of barriers to engagement in civic life, ensuring that older individuals remain active agents in the social contract.

This perspective challenges traditional notions of aging as a period of disengagement (Cumming & Henri, 1961) and instead highlights the continuum of citizenship or the capabilities to develop civic engagement and active citizenship along the life cycle even in later life, whereby individuals accumulate, create, develop and exercise civic competencies throughout their lifespan (Sgier, L. & Lucas, 2018; Lucas, B. et alii., 2022).



Implementing sustainable citizenship requires policies and practices that promote access to rights and lifelong learning. Their goal is to prevent older people from ignorance of rights, but also cognitive gaps in social life as well as isolation that often results from implicit or explicit process of exclusion linked to ageing. These policies and initiatives aim at the dismantling of different kind of barriers hindering social and civic participation of older individuals in the City considered both as territory of life and as a place for public decision making within the public space (Harbermas J., 1989; Buffel T., Philipson C., 2019).

As argued in the UNESCO "Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education" (2015), lifelong learning is essential for maintaining social cohesion and empowering older adults to participate fully in decision-making processes. It is a fundamental right and a key enabler of active citizenship. In its report "Education 2030 Framework for Action", UNESCO calls for "ensuring equal learning opportunities for all, including older adults, to adapt to societal transformations." However, as it is highlighted in this report, there is a persistent gap in education and skills development for aging populations.

There are many factors that explain the existence of this gap. Though their combinations may vary across societies, the UNESCO's Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4, 2019) mentions the following three, such as the poor access to digital literacy programs for older adults, thus limiting their participation in modern economies and civic engagement. Despite its potential to foster social cohesion and resilience, the intergenerational knowledge transfer is often overlooked. Finally, many lifelong learning programs fail to integrate older populations, reinforcing the misconception that education is only for younger generations.

To overcome these challenges, UNESCO's Learning Cities initiative (2015) promotes policies that integrate education across all life stages, ensuring that older citizens remain engaged and empowered. Active citizenship must be supported by continuous learning and digital inclusion, enabling older individuals to fully participate in the social and political fabric of their societies.

Thus, the lifecourse perspective highlights the importance of adaptive policies, lifelong participation, and equitable opportunities for older citizens to remain fully integrated into democratic life.



### **1.3 Implementing inclusive policies for the lifelong civic engagement**

As populations age, ensuring the full participation of older citizens becomes a fundamental challenge. The way individuals progress through aging depends largely on the structure of opportunities, available resources, and incentives for developing and maintaining their capacities at all ages. Addressing the issue of opportunity structures leads us to a stark assessment of the place of aging individuals in civic life. This approach of participation dynamics at old age underlines the importance of a lifelong civic engagement. To encourage the civic engagement in all age groups there is a specific requirement of global social investment strategies based on preventive interventions throughout life, rather than being confined to specific ages. This is the only way to equip individuals to face new risks in their increasingly flexible and uncertain life trajectories.

As a result, new imperatives emerge for modernizing public policies on aging. The main objective is now to help individuals develop their autonomy and capacities throughout life, as well as to promote their multi-faceted skills, enabling them to take responsibility despite the increasing alternation between periods of activity and inactivity throughout their life course.

At the same time one of the challenges in public policy on aging is to dismantle systemic barriers that hinder the participation of older individuals in civic and economic life. Explicit or implicit ageism represent a key challenge to older people's integration in modern societies (Butler R., 1979; Achenbaum A., 2015; Lagacé M., 2010). Older populations including the more vulnerable and frail segments of this population may be victims of aware and unaware processes of exclusion. As it was put by the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) and other reports such as the UNESCO's 2017 « Guide for Age-Inclusive Cities » the issue of specific barriers to economic, political, and social participation due to systemic ageism that many elderly individuals still face in their late years need to be tackled by public policies. The report also highlights discriminatory practices in labor markets and public policies, which limit opportunities for active engagement in civic life.

Recently, the Global Report on Ageism (2021) developed for the campaign by WHO, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Population Fund, points out age



discrimination as a significant obstacle to sustainable citizenship, as it diminishes the role of older citizens in policymaking, employment, and community life. Despite international efforts and initiatives to promote inclusive policies, many societies including France, are still struggling with age-based discrimination in employment, leading to economic exclusion (Mercat-Brun, 2020). Moreover, the civic participation for older individuals, such as lower voter turnout and exclusion from policymaking, is still a common practice, fueled by the existence of negative stereotypes that marginalize older people in social and cultural spheres.

International organizations promote sustainable and active citizenship and provide frameworks, such as UNESCO's 2015 "Framework for Inclusive Policy Design", which emphasizes human rights, equal access, and intergenerational cooperation as critical elements of long-term sustainability.

Achieving the sustainable citizenship for all ages requires thus adapted legislations and institutional frameworks from the most universal level to the most local. One of the key strategies would be the territorial approach to aging. It recognizes the City as both a living environment and a political space. This aligns with the initiatives of the World Health Organization's which promote the development of the Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. This program encourages local governments and decision makers to implement participatory planning processes that would actively involve older citizens in shaping urban policies. By fostering inclusive urban governance, these initiatives seek to reframe the narrative of aging in terms of vulnerability and frailty to active contribution to local societies.

## **II. A Global Perspective on Human Rights: The Issue of a Convention on the Rights of Older People**

After having put our issue in context and discussed key principles, it remains to be seen how they can be incorporated into a legal framework that is both broad and universal, yet also local and specialized

### **2.1 Genesis, development and challenges**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 (UN, 1948), constitutes a foundational and



fundamental pillar that articulates the inalienable human rights that must be universally upheld and protected.

To implement the global human rights framework entailed in the UDHR within specific contexts, various segments of the global population have been granted targeted international conventions designed to safeguard, reaffirm, and codify their rights. These conventions have been instrumental in promoting and protecting the rights of various groups. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted, often regarded as an “international bill of rights” for women, establishing legal protections against all forms of gender-based discrimination. A decade later, in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted (November 20, 1989) to enshrine and standardize the rights of children on a global scale. The following year, migrant workers were also formally recognized under international law with the adoption of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW) in December 1990, ensuring protections against exploitation and violations of their fundamental rights. More recently, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted on December 13, 2006, with the aim of promoting, protecting, and guaranteeing the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities.

Given the fact that a significant proportion of older individuals also experience disabilities, the argument is frequently made that the CRPD already addresses many of the concerns related to the rights of older persons. However, this perspective overlooks crucial gaps, particularly regarding the systemic character of ageism, which is not adequately covered by existing international frameworks (Scheider-Yilmaz, M., Viriot Durandal, J.-P. & Fougeyrollas, P. 2023; Mercat Brun M. & Gründler T., 2024)

As of today, there is still no dedicated international convention exclusively enshrining the rights of older persons. Moreover, most of international programmatic statements and declarations, such as The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) largely ignored ageing issues. Despite ongoing efforts, the concept of an International Convention on the Rights of Older Persons continues to encounter persistent resistance and rejection. International conventions have long emphasized the imperative for global implementation of human rights principles, a necessity that has become even more pressing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which starkly exposed the precarious conditions, systemic discrimination, and vulnerabilities faced by older populations worldwide.



## **2.2 Significant mobilization has recorded within the last decades**

Aging emerged on the international stage as a major challenge for public policies and fundamental rights with the adoption of the 1982 Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing, which historically represents the first cornerstone of the United Nations' framework on demographic transitions. From that moment, the UN formally addressed the effects of aging on contemporary societies and began to structure its approach to the rights of older persons, notably through the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the Focal Point on Ageing, as well as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

The UN has since organized recurrent high-level debates, culminating twenty years later in the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). Over time, the UN sought to establish a systematic evaluation of this plan at regional (continental and subcontinental) levels in 2007 and subsequently in Vienna in 2012. Through these various milestones, the UN facilitated the emergence of supranational discussions on aging, prompting reflections on public policies beyond national frameworks and laying the foundations for an international debate on rights.

By mobilizing data, fostering international comparisons—particularly through monitoring aging policies worldwide—and bringing together key stakeholders in major political discussions on the rights of older persons, the UN has built the foundation for a global inquiry into the potential adoption of an international convention on the rights of older persons. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and international experts have been actively engaged in these deliberations.

To further advance this dialogue, an Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG) was established in 2010 to bring together all relevant stakeholders around the convention project. The UN Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG), established in 2010, achieved a historic consensus recognizing critical gaps in the international human rights framework regarding older individuals. The group formally recommended the creation of a new human rights treaty specifically dedicated to protecting the rights of older persons. Subsequently, on September 27, 2013, the Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 24/20, establishing the mandate of the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by



Older Persons. Rosita Kornfeld became the first international expert in the UN history and has developed major steps to foster the convention. This mandate was most recently renewed by Resolution 51/4 in 2022.

Before, another important step came in October 2021, when the UN Human Rights Council adopted its first substantive resolution focusing on the rights of older persons. This resolution called upon all member states to prohibit age-based discrimination and to implement concrete measures to combat ageism. Additionally, it mandated the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to produce a report on international legal standards for the protection of older persons, representing a significant move toward the development of a dedicated convention.

With the COVID pandemic large organization outside of the aging field became aware of the importance of older persons' rights and started to raise awareness on this issue and become advocates for older people. In 2020 Amnesty International drafted a very important report during COVID to alert public decision makers and public opinion (Amnesty International, 2020). In 2024, Amnesty International reinforced this momentum with the launch of the *Age Loud!* campaign, an initiative aimed at addressing age-related discrimination and abuse (Amnesty international, 2024). The campaign underscores the urgent need for a UN convention that would clearly define state obligations for the protection of older persons at the national level. By highlighting issues such as age discrimination, neglect, and abuse, it advocates for a comprehensive and legally binding framework to ensure the dignity and rights of older individuals are upheld.

These developments reflect a growing international debate on the creation (or non) of a legal instrument to safeguard the rights of older persons.

## **2.3 South America as a precursor?**

In the absence of an international treaty, several regional initiatives emerged fostering the idea of supranational rights regarding older citizens' and developing original frameworks of cooperation, monitoring and implementation.

The first initiative was launched in Latin America and the Caribbean with the San José Charter on the Rights of Older Persons which was adopted in May 2012 during the Third Regional Intergovernmental Conference on Ageing in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in San José, Costa Rica (ECLAC, 2012). This charter emphasizes the commitment of



participating governments to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of older persons and ban any form of age based discrimination and violence. It also advocates for the development of social protection systems that ensure the well-being and dignity of older individuals.

Few years later, the process led to the San José Convention, formally known as the *Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons*. The convention was adopted in 2015 by the Organization of American States (OAS) as the first legally binding international treaty dedicated to safeguarding the rights of older persons. It establishes a comprehensive framework to ensure the autonomy, dignity, and social inclusion of elderly individuals while addressing age discrimination, elder abuse, and barriers to essential services such as healthcare and social security but also work education, social and political participation. By obligating states to implement protective legal and policy measures, the Convention serves as a significant regional mechanism, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean and a first step to demonstrate the feasibility of a binding conventions. Its adoption underscores the effectiveness of regional human rights instruments, especially in contrast to ongoing global efforts, such as the UN's Open-Ended Working Group on Aging, which has yet to produce a universal binding agreement (Cisternas M.S. & Kornfeld-Matte, R., 2023). This regional convention also aims to provide experience for the development of a new international treaty, with advocates looking to the United Nations (UN) to develop a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (OAS, 2015; ECLAC, 2022).

The implementation of older people's rights and the mainstreaming of the paradigm of sustainable citizenship in a longevity society requires a shift in policy frameworks, moving beyond "protectionist" approaches and combating ageist behaviors (aware and unaware) to empower older individuals as active citizens. On the other hand, the integration of the participatory approaches into international aging policies, particularly within the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030) highlights the global relevance of inclusive governance mechanisms that transcend national contexts. Ultimately, the advancement of inclusive societies in the XXI century hinges on the recognition that citizenship is a lifelong endeavor, and that older individuals, far from being passive recipients of policies, must be active co-constructors of the public sphere.



In this context, the International Chair on inclusive societies and again with the support of the French speaking network REIACTIS<sup>1</sup> aimed to shift from a theoretical perspective to the development of a practical tool to implement empowerment processes with older persons. Therefore, this alliance of researchers created the Citizen Design Workshops (CDW) (see part III hereafter). This initiative offers a modest and pragmatic response of researchers from the academia to foster the participatory methodologies in order to enhance the agency of older populations, reinforcing their role in co-producing public policies at every stage of public decision making including the most local one. The insights derived from the French experience of CDWs offer valuable lessons for the development of age-inclusive participatory models worldwide. In a broader perspective, one could question the role of Social and Human Sciences in tackling the issue of citizen participation not only from a critical or theoretical perspective but also by experimenting the empowerment process from the local level to the more central strata of public decision.

### **III. From Top to Bottom: From Theoretical and Ethical Frameworks to Concrete Initiatives Towards Methodological Tools for Promoting Inclusion, Citizenship, and Participation of Older Citizens**

#### **3.1 Genesis of the Citizen Design Workshops (CDW) and Initial Developments**

The approach adopted by the SIAGE International Chair is inspired by public sociology. Public sociology refers to the practice of applying sociological insights, theories, and research to engage with and contribute to public discourse and social issues beyond academia. It involves utilizing sociological perspectives to analyze and address social problems while communicating sociological knowledge to a broader audience, including policymakers, activists, community leaders, and the civil society.

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<sup>1</sup> Réseau d"Études International sur l"Âge, la Citoyenneté et l'Intégration Socio-économique.



This article follows a multi-scalar approach, ranging from a macro-sociological analysis of universal principles and values developed at the global level to their implementation in local interactions with the individuals directly concerned. Beginning with the most theoretical research on international public policy frameworks, the research team progressively refines its focus towards field methods designed to align with these fundamental principles, simultaneously practicing both critical and pragmatic sociology. In this context, we examine the principles of participatory democracy, particularly through the empowerment of older individuals, with a specific focus on their inclusion in the decision-making processes of local aging policies.

The Citizen Design Workshops (CDW) represent both a methodological challenge and an innovation. Led by a French research team directed by Professors Jean-Philippe Viriot Durandal and Marion Scheider-Yilmaz, the method was initially experimented with in the Lorraine region, in eastern France. This participatory approach is distinguished by its ability to include populations that are generally underrepresented or excluded from consultative processes, such as women over 80 years old, elderly immigrants, and residents of nursing homes or senior residences. This methodology enables the direct involvement of older citizens in decision-making processes concerning local policies. The CDW, notably, facilitated consultations with older individuals on local aging policies and their adaptation following the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of the International Research Program on the Rights of Older Persons during COVID-19 (RIDPA). This program, set to conclude in 2025, has highlighted numerous obstacles to the active integration of older individuals within public governance structures, both in exceptional circumstances such as the COVID-19 period and in more routine contexts preceding and following the pandemic (Argoud, 2022; Viriot-Durandal, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2015, 2024).

One of the main advantages of the Citizen Design Workshop methodology is that it extends beyond merely identifying the specific needs of older individuals in their environment or cataloging grievances. Instead, the methodology culminates in the formulation of concrete and structured proposals, compiled into a "Citizen Memorandum," which is then presented by the elderly participants themselves to local elected officials. This process promotes social inclusion and active citizenship while enhancing local policies through expertise derived from lived experiences.



Initiated in response to a request from the Development Council of the Val de Fensch Agglomeration Community (CAVF), this project was designed by two sociologists affiliated with the SIAGE International Chair and the International Research Network on Aging, Citizenship, and Socioeconomic Integration (REIACTIS). The first pilot experiment of the Citizen Design Workshops took place in the Val de Fensch territory between 2018 and 2021, in a former steel-producing area in the Grand Est region of France.

This initiative aimed to establish a participatory dialogue involving older citizens, researchers, local policymakers, and key stakeholders, ensuring a diverse range of aging experiences was represented in local decision-making processes. The project sought to enhance the autonomy of participants and experiment with an empowerment process in the field of aging policies.

### **3.2 Structuring empowerment processes: a methodological challenge**

The methodology is structured around a series of six workshops, organized into three main phases: participatory diagnosis, solution development, and public restitution.

The first phase, participatory diagnosis, begins with a workshop aimed at identifying and categorizing key issues based on participants' personal experiences. This exercise, utilizing the Metaplan method, helps to highlight fundamental concerns. A subsequent discussion group then works to prioritize and deepen the identified needs, fostering a precise and collectively shared diagnosis.

The second phase focuses on solution development. It starts with an idea-generation session, where participants are encouraged to propose potential solutions in an open and creative setting. These proposals are then refined by incorporating feedback from other territories facing similar aging-related challenges. This step results in the formalization of ideas into structured tool sheets detailing the diagnosis, objectives, required resources, potential partners, and even post-action evaluation methods. The tool sheets are categorized by theme and compiled into a "Citizen Memorandum" to facilitate their adoption by policymakers.

Finally, the last phase is dedicated to public restitution. Representatives from each group are selected to present the tool sheets. All participants receive public speaking training to better advocate for their proposals and participate in a rehearsal before the final meeting with elected officials. The process culminates in an official presentation of the findings to policymakers and



their teams, aiming to initiate dialogue and encourage the practical implementation of proposed solutions.

### **3.3 Objectives, impact, and future perspectives**

This structured approach combines individual expression with collective deliberation to generate practical solutions that can be integrated into local policies. It also fosters social inclusion and innovation by redefining the relationships between older citizens, their environment, and public decision-makers.

Through this methodology, the Citizen Design Workshop approach surpasses mere consultation and fosters the genuine empowerment of older citizens by developing concrete recommendations and solutions. This dual reflective and practical tool aims to enhance active participation in local aging policies while serving as a mechanism for social and democratic innovation. By redefining the inclusion of older individuals in public life, it contributes to the coherence of local aging policies with the diverse needs expressed by older citizens.

Following the pilot experiment, seven French municipalities and territories joined the project, further enriching the understanding of participatory dynamics within different groups.

Among these seven territories, particular attention will be given to the city of Metz, where the research team is based. In 2022, Metz received the "Platinum" label from the WHO's Age-Friendly Cities Program. The workshops conducted in Metz focused on improving access to healthcare and health services for older citizens, involving 23 voluntary participants. An initial group was formed and met at Metz City Hall. To ensure broader inclusivity, a second group was created within a senior residence, incorporating individuals often overlooked in consultation processes. Following nine workshops, 19 tool sheets were developed and classified into four major themes: Health and Care; Autonomy and Prevention; Combating Ageism and Aging Well; Communication and Digital Inclusion.

### **3.4 Methodological, empirical, and theoretical challenges**

The methodological, empirical, and theoretical challenges encountered in this approach revolve around several key issues.

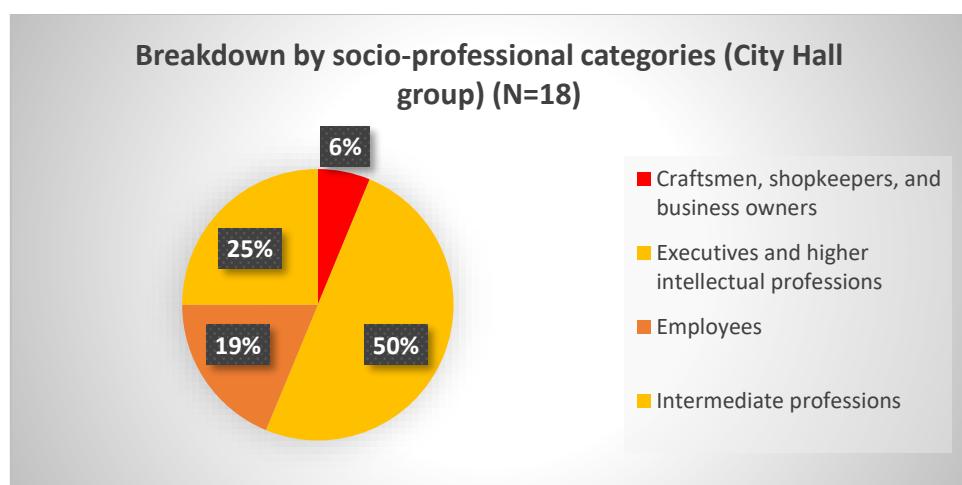
One of the primary challenges is ensuring the diversity of participants and territories while including marginalized groups. To achieve greater representativity, targeted recruitment



strategies are implemented, involving various stakeholders and using social geography techniques, as experimented in the Val de Fensch. The composition of participant groups is designed to reflect a diversity of socio-economic statuses and living conditions, integrating both private housing residents and senior residence inhabitants.

In this regard, the sociology of the members of the two groups in Metz was analyzed by the research team.

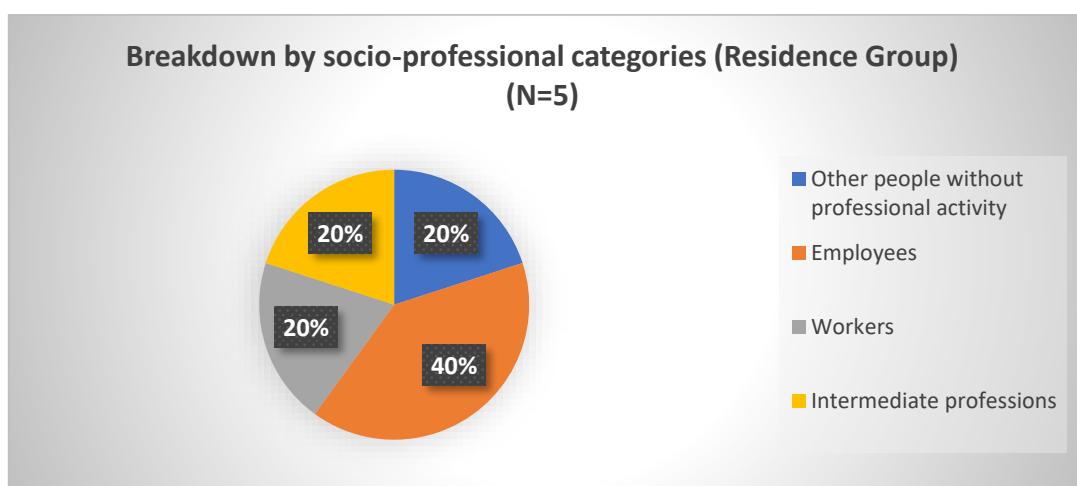
**Figure 1.** Composition of participants in the City Hall group by their social category



In the first group, the majority of members belong to the "executive and higher intellectual professions" (50%) and "intermediate professions" (25%).

In the second group, composed of senior residence residents, the profile is significantly more modest.

**Figure 2.** Composition of participants in the Residence group by their social category

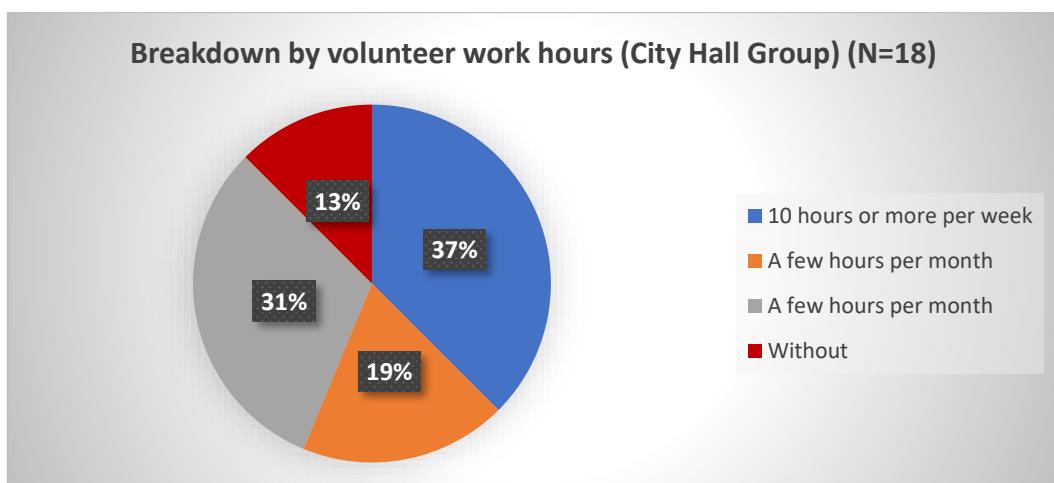


About 60% of the participants are either employed (40%) or individuals without professional activity.

Furthermore, gender differences are observed: the first group at the town hall consists of more than 75% women, compared to 60% in the residence.

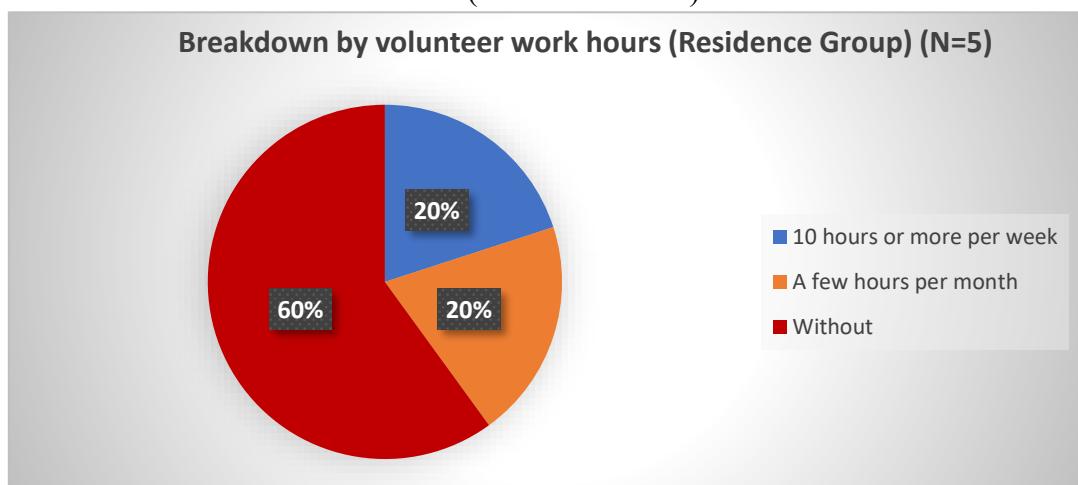
The second distinguishing factor between the groups, which interested the team, concerns the inclusion of elderly people in activities related to social and civic participation. It turned out that the first group included significantly more socially integrated individuals who participated formally in associations, whereas the second group was more distant from such involvement

**Figure 3.** Composition of participants of City Hall group by their engagement in voluntary work (number of hours)



In the first group, the majority reported a strong engagement from a few hours per week (19%) to ten hours or more (37%). Only 13% had no associative activity.

**Figure 4.** Composition of participants of Residence group by their engagement in voluntary work (number of hours)



In contrast, within the second group, the absence of associative involvement represented the dominant model (60%). Only 20% of the participants were strongly engaged (10 hours or more per week) in associative activities. The majority had no experience in participating in consultative bodies. The integration of what Pierre Rosanvallon describes as the "invisible citizens" of the Republic constitutes one of the challenges of these workshops, which aim to maintain vigilance regarding the sociological profile of participants.

However, the case of Metz did not involve initiatives within residential care facilities for dependent elderly individuals. The absence of the most vulnerable elderly populations in this territory was compensated by their inclusion in another group located in the Hauts-de-France region, in northern France. The approach based on place of residence and the integration of sociological contrasts is reinforced by vigilance regarding territorial diversity. Thus, various territorial configurations were included, incorporating both metropolitan areas such as Metz and Strasbourg, as well as smaller municipalities like Thann (Alsace), medium-sized towns, and even a rural village (Entre Vignes) in the South of France.

Beyond attentiveness to sociological profiles and contexts, one of the key challenges lies in articulating this diversity with the objective of producing citizen expertise. The aim is to move beyond individual grievances to foster the creation of a genuine form of citizen expertise, bringing together diverse social spheres. The goal is to transform personal concerns into collective intelligence, enabling the emergence of a body of expert citizens capable of advocating collectively. Following the diagnostic phase, this expertise materializes through the development of thematic toolkits and the drafting of the "Citizen Memorandum", with the

support of researchers who synthesize the recommendations and proposals formulated by elderly participants.

Engagement with public decision-making and institutional processes also constitutes a key issue. The “Citizen Memorandum” serves as an advocacy tool, allowing participants to exert influence in public discussions. To strengthen this engagement, training sessions are provided to develop a ‘citizen habitus’, encouraging citizens to participate in forums and participatory spaces while respecting their experiences, intentions, and messages.

Within this dynamic, the experience in Metz was largely confined to a strong presence within an Agora. The Agora represents an exploratory framework where ideas are generated without the expectation of immediate political decision-making. It aligns with participatory mechanisms such as public consultations and citizen assemblies. The level of integration into decision-making processes could be further advanced through inclusion in ‘forums’, that is, structured decision-making bodies designed for general or specialized discussions. These forums facilitate negotiations among stakeholders, shaping territorial public policies. One could envision that the work of elderly citizens serves as preparatory groundwork for municipal deliberations, where elected officials would include discussions of the Citizen Design Workshops' proposals on their agenda.

Finally, tools have been developed to provide both citizens and researchers with post-hoc evaluation mechanisms to monitor public decisions. These tools include integrated evaluation mechanisms within action sheets and progress reports at six- and twelve-month intervals.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain, both for social science research and for the deepening of democratic mechanisms. This necessitates ongoing reflection on participatory practices and their impact on public governance. The International SIAGE Chair thus intends to further develop the experimentation of Citizen Design Workshops to refine the inclusion model.

## Conclusion

Demographic transition presents complex challenges for active and sustainable citizenship, urging for a redefinition of inclusion, participation, and intergenerational solidarity. This article advocates for a paradigm shift—from perceiving aging as a burden to recognizing



it as an opportunity—and calls for policies that empower individuals throughout their lives, ensuring that citizenship remains dynamic, participatory, and equitable at all ages.

The method of Citizen Design Workshops (CDW) designed by a group of French sociologists offers an original approach to enhancing the social participation of the elderly in local decision-making process. Its first results prove that older adults are more than able to learn different ways of engaging within the proposed framework becoming active contributors to shaping their communities and local governance structures. These workshops promote interactions between older people, public decision-makers (elected officials, professionals), and civil society actors in shaping public action.

The example of Citizen Design Workshops underlines the value of participatory approaches as a tool allowing the inclusion of groups that are often marginalized or even excluded from local decision-making dynamics. These methodologies could be embedded within gerontological engineering, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic model of civic engagement across the life course.

By embracing these transformations, societies can turn demographic change into a catalyst for a more inclusive, just, and sustainable future, as envisioned in UNESCO's Global commitment to sustainable development and social inclusion. This article aims to open new debates on the role of social scientist and methodologies in the social and political process of reshaping and implementing a broader participatory democracy framework.

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