

# Celebrating 60 Years of International Engagement

By Jo Ann Jenkins

This year, as we celebrate AARP's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it seems like a good time to reflect on our history of international engagement on global aging issues. As the world's largest organization dedicated to the interests of older people, AARP is committed to using our experience, knowledge and resources to work with other countries to address the global concerns of older people and their families.

The aging of the world's population is the transformational issue of our time. Today, Japan is the only country in the world where those aged 60 and over represent 30 percent or more of the population. By 2050, 62 countries — including China — will reach that milestone.

We live in a world where people age 60 and over will soon outnumber children ages 5 and under. Demographers predict that in countries that are aging well, more than half the children born today will live to 100 — and some researchers believe that the first person who will live to the age of 150 has already been born.

In 2030 — only 11 years from now — the first Millennials will start turning 50, and the first GenXers will turn 65. At the end of 2030, the first Boomers will begin turning 85, swelling the ranks of what is already the fastest growing age group in the US.

Yet, global aging is about much more than demographics. Advances in research and technology are driving innovation in virtually every field that affects our ability to live well as we age. Science is making longer lives possible — and we are beginning to see the impact of that on societies throughout the world.

As people get older, they share many of the same wants and needs, regardless of where they live. They want good health and financial security. And they want options for living their lives. They want to be included in and contribute to their societies and to be able to enjoy the opportunities that life has to offer.

Sharing these common concerns and interests, we believe that we can learn a lot from the experiences of other countries, and they can learn from our experience as well. In fact, AARP has always had an international view. Because of the far-sighted vision of AARP's founder, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, AARP has been involved internationally almost from its start in 1958. With the founding of AARP's Travel Tours in the late 1950s and the publication of its main member publication, *Modern Maturity*, AARP started out by catering to members' desire to travel abroad and learn more about foreign cultures. Ultimately, Ethel Percy Andrus wanted members to see that the 50+ population around the world had the same concerns as their counterparts in the United States.

By 1963, Dr. Andrus thought the world was ready for an international organization, and AARP launched the *Association for Retired Persons International* (ARPI), an international membership organization, complete with its own magazine. She represented it and AARP at the Congress of the International Association of Gerontology in Copenhagen later that year. ARPI, however, proved to be an idea ahead of its time. It did not attract the international membership expected and was allowed to die quietly later in the decade.

Looking for an alternative productive role AARP could play internationally, Bernard Nash, the executive director of AARP in the early 1970s, sent representatives abroad to meet with heads of non-governmental aging organizations (NGOs) in other countries to identify leadership opportunities. It soon became apparent that NGOs wanted some international representation so they could be heard in international forums, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Council of Europe, which were becoming interested in global population aging. They also wanted to learn more about each other's programs and policies. These goals were fully consistent with Ethel Percy Andrus's original vision.

As a result, *the International Federation on Ageing* (IFA) was born in late 1973. The IFA today is a federation of some 150 member organizations (mainly national NGOs) representing or serving older persons. AARP was one of about a dozen organizations that

formed the IFA. AARP agreed to fund the organization and host its secretariat at its headquarters in Washington, DC, for several years in order to give the new organization a strong start. Bernard Nash became IFA's first president.

While AARP continued to maintain its own international activities, its main energies in the 1970s and most of the 1980s were directed to strengthening and working through the IFA. In 1982, IFA was instrumental in convening the first UN World Assembly on Ageing (WAA), which produced the world's first International Plan of Action on Ageing. IFA had started advocating for such a conference within months of its launch in 1973. William Kerrigan, IFA's General Secretary at the time and the head of AARP's International Department became Secretary-General of the World Assembly — the first time in UN history that a representative of an NGO had become the director of a single-focus world conference. Cy Brickfield, AARP's executive director in the early 1980s, served on the US delegation to the World Assembly.

Slowly, AARP began to launch international projects of its own. It provided background information to the 1981 White House Conference on Aging on what the US could learn from other countries with regard to policies for older persons. In 1986, AARP organized the US-Canadian conference on *Income Security and Long-Term Care for Women in the Midlife and Beyond*. In 1987, AARP's Public Policy Institute started conducting research on other countries' aging policies and their implications for the United States, a practice that continues to this day.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a great increase in awareness around the world that populations everywhere were aging. Because of its rich experience and international outreach, AARP saw an opportunity to make a larger international contribution in its own right. Thus, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, AARP sought to harness its expertise in organizing and utilizing older volunteers to offer representatives of Central European countries a series of workshops in Europe on stimulating the voluntary sector in these nations. AARP also utilized its knowledge of older women's issues to collaborate with the Pan American Health Organization to

conduct research on this topic in the Americas and produced one of the first international publications on the status and challenges of midlife and older women in the region.

In 1985, AARP joined the United Nations NGO Committee on Aging in New York to promote consideration of aging issues in the UN and appointed its first representative at UN headquarters in New York. Two years later, AARP obtained Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN, permitting it to participate more actively in UN affairs related to aging. In 1996, AARP helped found the Geneva International Network on Aging (GINA), a group that represented aging interests with all the international organizations headquartered in Geneva.

AARP has participated in the major world conferences sponsored by the UN which have relevance for aging — i.e., the first *World Assembly on Ageing*, Vienna (1982); *World Conference on the Advancement of Women*, Nairobi (1985); the *World Summit for Social Development*, Copenhagen (1995); the *World Conference on Population & Development*, Cairo (1995); the *World Conference on Women*, Beijing (1995); the *Conference on Human Settlements*, Istanbul (1996); the *Millennium Conference* (2000); and the second *World Assembly on Ageing*, Madrid (2002).

In 1999, we celebrated the UN International Year of Older Persons, and AARP served as the NGO focal point for the United States. On the eve of the Madrid World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, AARP co-sponsored a meeting in Malta on *Population Aging and Development* to guide policy recommendations for the World Assembly and, at the Assembly itself, organized a number of workshops on key policy issues it thought should be covered by the delegates.

In 2007, AARP started an annual series of briefings on global aging at the UN focusing on trends and new developments in income security, health, and an enabling environment for aging populations. The Briefing Series on Global Aging takes place at the time that delegates from around the world attend the UN Social Development Commission meetings. AARP also participated in the 5-year review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

Throughout the early 2000s, AARP continued to play a leadership role on the NGO Committee on Aging at the UN. And in 2000, AARP began to aggressively expand its international advocacy role on behalf of older persons, as well as the international exchange of policy-relevant information about aging issues. For example:

- AARP hosted five conferences in our “Reinventing Retirement” series — in London, UK (2004), Washington, DC (2005), Tokyo, Japan (2007) Dürnstein, Austria (2008), and Singapore (2009). These major international events brought together the world’s top thought leaders to focus on changing labor markets, retirement systems, and the role of older people as workers and investors.
- In 2005, during the national debate on partial privatization of Social Security, AARP convened leading stakeholders and voices on pension issues from the United States and United Kingdom to demonstrate the full range of implications brought about by privatization of public pension systems.
- In 2006, members of the Board of Directors traveled to four European capitals as part of a Leadership Study to examine European models of health and long-term care. Many of the better practices they observed were subsequently and continue to be promoted in our domestic policy outreach.
- In January 2008, at “Community 50+ Asia,” we brought together more than 120 leaders of NGOs from the Pacific Rim countries in Hawaii to conduct workshops on how to build better and stronger organizations to serve the interests of older persons.
- In April 2008, we organized “Health Care ‘08: Global Trends and Best Practices,” in Washington. More than 200 international experts explored the challenges and opportunities driving the health care policy agenda, highlighting the imperative of fundamental reforms in the US to expand access and increase quality of care.

- AARP Foundation played an instrumental role in helping the European Union and its member states draft and implement anti-age discrimination laws in employment across the continent.

Our international activities continue to focus on key issues pertaining to health and financial security, livable communities and helping people 50+ choose how they live as they age. In 2012, (in affiliation with the World Health Organization) we launched the *AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities*. The purpose of this network is to educate, encourage, promote and recognize improvements that make cities, towns, and counties more age-friendly for their residents. As of 2018, 305 communities in 40 states have joined the *Network*, and more than 75 million people — that’s one of every five people in the United States — now live in an *Age-Friendly Network* community.

AARP continues to have an active program of international conferences that has focused on such topics as the aging workforce, long-term care, health care and health information technology, income security, retirement, livable communities, pharmaceuticals, and community-building. We collaborate with others on international conferences, events and policy discussions to highlight and promote best practices. Partners include the United Nations, World Economic Forum, European Commission, OECD, national governments, and US Department of State. And AARP promotes community building among civil society organizations serving 50+ populations around the world.

In October 2015, to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations International Day of Older Persons and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, we convened an AARP Symposium on Women and Aging to shed some light on the core issues women face as they age. In 2016, we introduced our new *Disrupt Aging* initiative at the Women in the World Summit in New York, OECD meetings in Paris and at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In 2015 AARP and a coalition of International NGOs were successful in advocating for the inclusion of older persons into the UN Sustainable Development Goals, also known as agenda 2030. The group was formally recognized as The Stakeholder Group on Ageing (SGA) which is a member of the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders involved in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations General Assembly whose basic principle is to leave no one behind. AARP plays a lead role in the SGA as a co-chair with HelpAge International.

In 2017, we expanded the international reach of *Disrupt Aging*, with additional sessions at the World Economic Forum in Davos and addressing the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics World Congress. Also, at the OECD Forum, we presented findings of the *AARP Aging Readiness and Competitive Report (ARC)*, a landmark study that analyzed the preparedness of the US and 11 other nations to address the aging of their populations. In 2018, an AARP contingent traveled to Japan and China to meet with leaders of public and private sector organizations in a variety of industries to see how they were disrupting aging and making life better for people as they aged. This coincided with saw the publication of my book, *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age* in two versions of Chinese and in Korean.

All of our international efforts are based on the premise that we can learn a lot from the experiences of other countries, and they can learn from our experiences as well. If we are to reach our vision of building a society for all ages, where everyone has an opportunity and a right to age with independence, dignity and purpose, we need to reach beyond our borders to engage leaders in other countries — in government, business, and the non-profit sectors — to address policy challenges and to help find solutions. AARP has been doing this for 60 years, and we will continue to do so in the years to come. ♦



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