**Replies by the Government of Finland to the questionnaire by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the promotion and the protection of the rights of older persons in the context of climate change**

**23 December 2020**

The Government of Finland presents the following replies to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 of the questionnaire sent by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on 17 September 2020.

**1. Please describe the impacts of the adverse effects of climate change on the full and effective enjoyment of the human rights of older persons. Where possible, please share specific examples and stories.**

The impacts of climate change also apply to older people and the impacts must be monitored and prepared for. Prolonged heat waves can be fatal especially for people over 75 years of age.

It is estimated that the adverse effects of climate change, such as warming and storms, will hit the most vulnerable groups of people the need for social support and assistance will also increase.

Furthermore, with increasing energy and the transition to carbon-neutral energy, the position of low-income and poor people, who are already often poorly populated, will deteriorate without the support of the community.

*The Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health SOSTE* considers the risk of the adverse health effects of climate change to be often higher among the older age groups. Older age increases the risk, for instance, waterborne diseases which have been estimated to increase due to climate change in Finland. Prolonged heat waves increase mortality especially among the people over 75 years of age. Older people with limited physical or mental functioning are less likely to be able to escape the heat compared with people without functional limitations. The heating of buildings is well taken care of in Finland, but the cooling systems are not. The rescue services have practices of evacuating people from frost during power outages, but there are no similar practices for heat waves.

In addition to heat waves, other increased extreme weather conditions can also have adverse effects especially for the older people living in the countryside. Storms that cause power outages can cause difficulties, for instance, for people who have medicines that should be kept in a refrigerator. Extreme weather conditions can also prevent older people from leaving their homes and exercising and thus decrease their functional ability and independence.

The social justice of the climate change mitigation is important for older people’s participation and preventing energy poverty among them. Many of the older people living in the countryside are often dependent on vehicles that run by fossil fuels and fossil-based heating. This may lead to the situation where they could feel excluded from the climate discussion and efforts, because they cannot live in a climate-friendly way in terms of housing and transport. In addition, retired people living in old houses with oil heating have been recognised to be at risk of suffering from energy poverty in Finland.

*The Finnish Climate Change Panel* considers the increased frequency or intensity of heatwaves the most important direct impact. People who are chronically ill, or have reduced health in other ways, especially suffer in these situations. A recent paper by researchers of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare discusses how heatwaves are associated with increased risk of cardio-respiratory hospital admissions and concludes that there is a need to adapt to climate change in the public health sector, also in Northern Europe to protect vulnerable population groups.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare identify the following indirect impacts of climate change, which may have health implications: water-borne disease outbreaks, vector-borne infectious diseases, and indoor air problems related to moisture damage in buildings.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other impacts of climate change may be slip and fall accidents due to slippery conditions, since weather conditions are expected to fluctuate between freezing and thawing during the winter period. In addition, winters may become darker due to less snow cover, which may lead to increased mental health deterioration and depression. Extreme weather phenomena may lead to accidents and decreased service availability. When considering adaptation plans, these aspects need to be taken into account, to ensure that vulnerability of the elderly is reduced, and adaptation plans take in account their special circumstances.

Some of these adverse effects have been specifically addressed in the context of older people in a study in the 2016 study “Characterising vulnerability of the elderly to climate change” by a group of researchers from Nordic institutions.[[3]](#footnote-3) They identify levels of vulnerability, various climate change effects relevant to the Nordic context and combine these to map out indices and conduct interviews. Their analysis is available online.

Finally, *the Finnish Climate Change Panel* emphasizes that it is essential to see older people as a diverse group with different levels of skills, resources, capabilities and health. They are also exposed to different climate related hazards and their vulnerability varies, meaning understanding these and their dynamics is key to understanding their overall climate risk. Furthermore, the ability to adapt to changes in everyday life may be easy for some, while others may need support to have a fulfilling life, while facing the adverse effects of climate change.

**2. Please describe any specific policy, legislation, practice or strategy that addresses the nexus between climate change and the rights of older persons. In particular, please share any information related to policies that ensure the participation of older persons in the design, planning, implementation and monitoring of climate change mitigation and adaptation measures; learning from the knowledge and experience of older persons; as well as supporting the independence and autonomy of older persons. Please note and identify any relevant mechanisms for ensuring accountability for these commitments, including their means of implementation.**

One of the aims of the Finnish Elderly Care Act is to improve the opportunities for older people to participate in the preparation of the services they need in the municipality. Municipalities must cooperate with other municipal sectors, companies, organizations representing the ageing population and other public utilities in order to support the wellbeing, health, functional capacity and independent performance of the older population and draw up a plan for the support. In the plan, the state of wellbeing, the adequacy and quality of the services available to, and the factors affecting the need for services of older population must be assessed.

In Finland, the Local Government Act (section 27) stipulates that in order to ensure the opportunities for participation and influence of the elderly population, the municipal government must set up a Council for Older people and ensure the conditions for its operation. The Council for the older people has the opportunity to influence the planning, preparation and monitoring of the activities of the various sectors of the municipality in matters relevant to the wellbeing, health, inclusion, living environment, housing, mobility or performance of daily activities of the elderly population or the services they need.

The Finnish Climate Act is under revision. The Government’s proposal for a revised Climate Change Act is due to be completed in early 2021.

The National Climate Change Adaptation Plan[[4]](#footnote-4) published in 2014 recognises that the magnitude of the adverse impacts of climate change should also be considered from the perspective of regions and population groups including older people.

**3. Please share a summary of any relevant data that captures how the adverse effects of climate change have affected older persons, taking into account multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination (i.e. discrimination based on a combination of multiple grounds, including disability, gender, race, colour, sex, language, religion, nationality and migration status) - including in older age cohorts.**

A study conducted in Finland in 2014 has found that in the 2000s, hot weather has increased mortality by up to 21% on average. The heat cycle has been estimated to be a greater risk to women than to men. The body's ability to regulate its temperature will decrease with ageing, and the risk of dehydration will also increase. The risk of mortality is high especially in people with circulatory and respiratory diseases, mental disorders or nervous system disorders. Living alone can also increase the health risk.

<https://www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/116296> (only in Finnish)

<https://thl.fi/fi/web/ymparistoterveys/ilmasto-ja-saa/helle> (only in Finnish)

In 2018 the effects of heat waves increased mortality by 14 % in over 65-years age group.

<https://thl.fi/fi/-/viime-kesan-helleaalto-lisasi-ikaantyneiden-kuolleisuutta-helteisiin-on-hyva-varautua-ajoissa> (only in Finnish)

Effects of climate change on waterborne diseases (elderly people risk group):

<https://thl.fi/fi/web/infektiotaudit-ja-rokotukset/-/ilmastonmuutos-lisaa-kampylobakteerin-aiheuttaman-suolistoinfektion-riskia-pohjoismaissa> (only in Finnish)

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-70593-y>

Study on adaptation and risk mitigation in health care:

<https://journal.fi/gerontologia/article/view/64223>

**4. Please describe any mechanisms and tools that are in place to measure and monitor the impacts of climate change on the full and effective enjoyment of the human rights of older persons.**

The Finnish institute for health and welfare monitors the effects of heat on elderly people. For now the focus is on mortality, but morbidity effects are studied currently.

**5. Please identify and share examples of good practices and challenges in the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of the human rights of older persons in the context of the adverse effects of climate change, including any age-appropriate or sensitive support services that are provided.**

Hot weather and heatwaves are a health risk also in Finland. The risk of serious health hazards particularly affects the elderly and those suffering from long-term illnesses. Hot and prolonged heatwaves that last for a few weeks can cause up to a few hundred deaths in Finland.

Recommended isolation and avoidance of close contacts related to the prevention of COVID-19 infections may increase the risk of health hazards caused by heat if the person belonging to a risk group can’t get help in preventing heat-related health effects or if they don’t dare to leave their home even if it gets unbearably hot. Risk groups may also avoid seeking treatment in fear of infection.

During heatwaves, it is recommended to avoid sunshine, hot places and extra physical strain. Remember to drink enough water and eat to avoid dehydration and low blood sodium. You should also wear light, breezy clothes and cool your body with cool showers or cold wraps.

*The Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health SOSTE* considers that switching oil heating to ground heat, air-to-water-heat-pump or district heating could decrease retired people’s risk for energy poverty.

**7. Please provide any additional information you believe would be useful to support climate action that promotes the full and effective enjoyment of the rights of older persons.**

Health care handbook on heat waves (only in Finnish):

<http://www.kuumainfo.fi/materials/TerveydenhuollonKylmakuumaEopas.pdf>

*The Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health SOSTE* notes that *t*he Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and National Institute of Health are preparing the Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the social affairs and health sector in Finland. The adaptation plan will likely improve the systematic prevention of the adverse effects of climate change on the full and effective enjoyment of human rights of the older persons.

*The Finnish Climate Change Panel* notes that in a research project Extreme Temperature Alerts for Europe (EXTREMA)[[5]](#footnote-5) satellite, weather and city-specific data were used to assess in real time the city areas that would suffer most during an ongoing event, such as extreme heat or cold. A mobile app was developed, which based on a user profile gives notifications of unsafe temperatures and provides navigation information, by foot or public transit, to the nearest or most fitting cooling centre. This application is in use in some European cities, but not in Finland.

Automation and artificial intelligence in heating and electricity use could help dealing with temperature changes in homes of older people, and thus lessen the adverse effects. Automation can help keep homes a comfortable temperature by adjusting based on weather forecasts – a sudden frost or heat wave would be prepared for. Automation would help with energy costs as well, once installed.

Flood alert systems and coping mechanisms are something that would provide insights for coping with other adverse weather effects.

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1. Sohail, H., Tiittanen, P., Kollanus, V. and Lanki, T., 2020. Heat, heatwaves and cardiorespiratory hospital admissions in Helsinki, Finland. European Journal of Public Health. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://thl.fi/en/web/environmental-health/climate-and-weather/climate-change based on <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161015/43-2018-Saa%20ja%20ilmastoriskit%20Suomessa.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Only in Finnish) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carter, T.R., Fronzek, S., Inkinen, A., Lahtinen, I., Lahtinen, M., Mela, H., O’Brien, K.L., Rosentrater, L.D., Ruuhela, R., Simonsson, L. and Terama, E., 2016. Characterising vulnerability of the elderly to climate change in the Nordic region. Regional Environmental Change, 16(1), pp.43-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://mmm.fi/en/nature-andclimate/climate-change-adaptation> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://extrema.space/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)