

2 October 2008

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
on the International Day of Older Persons "A Call for a Convention on the Rights of
Older Persons"**

His Excellency Paulo de Tarso Vannuchi, Special Secretary of Human Rights of Brazil,
Ms. Florence Denmark, Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing,
Panellists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the President of the General Assembly, Father Miguel d'Escoto, I am pleased to convey to you his best wishes. He very much regrets that his official prevent him from being here this morning. As the oldest elected President of the General Assembly you can be assured that he is indeed with you in spirit and conviction. Please allow me to share with you his message:

Over the past 63 years, a number of new and pressing issues have been added to the agenda of the UN General Assembly. Many, like concern for the environment, are a longstanding concern of the United Nations, but it is only more recently as consensus has emerged of the alarming impact and man-made origins of climate change, that this issue has moved to the forefront of the global agenda.

The unprecedented demographic phenomenon of our rapidly ageing population is another important issue affecting societies around the globe. Yet this issue is still not receiving the attention that it deserves. For this reason the International Day of Older Persons constitutes an important opportunity to raise awareness of a range of issues affecting one of the most rapidly growing sectors of our global population, and in particular the human rights dimensions.

At the age of 75, I have grown up and matured in tandem with our dear United Nations. I am honored that I, a fellow senior citizen, have been entrusted with the Presidency of the General Assembly. I hope that you share with me a certain sense of pride as I assume this post.

Like so many of you here today – concerned citizens who wish to share your hard-earned expertise and wisdom in solidarity with the UN and our brothers and sisters around the world – I come to this task with the same passion for justice that has inspired me throughout my life.

Indeed, I believe that this passion to defend the world's vulnerable, and which inspires our involvement here, is what gives meaning to our lives. Our involvement in today's key issues is what enables us keep pace with our world and to enrich the perspectives of our youth in our joint search for solutions.

Each of us here is well aware that our longevity is a mixed blessing. Many of us are living longer, healthier and more productive lives than ever. We are forsaking retreat into retirement to join together in activism and solidarity. But older people are among the poorest in our societies and, all too often, the most neglected. They are especially vulnerable to the food and energy crises that can push older people into extreme poverty.

But we are getting better organized every day. As elders, our social involvement is transforming and revitalizing the neglected role of civic participation for the betterment of our frequently mismanaged communities. As experts, as organizers and as volunteers, we are leading the charge against indifference, against the injustice of economic and social systems that afford the benefits of development to some and deny them to others.

Experience has shown us our interdependence and connectedness with others. We know intuitively and empirically that we must look at the world in terms of “we and ours” rather than “I and mine”. And we have the time, the expertise and resources to make a big difference.

But social policy has yet to catch up with demographic reality of a rapidly growing population of older persons. After decades of focusing on younger people, their health and education and employment, we must adjust our national priorities to include the many concerns of the elderly. This is only right. Affording people human dignity means recognizing the needs and rights of all persons during each stage of life, and overcoming barriers that discriminate or deny them full participation in our human society.

Rare is the developing country where there are safety nets like social security, not to mention pension plans. We cannot neglect the health, the nutrition and the psychological well-being of our older citizens.

We must push the envelope of human rights to protect them and ensure their well-being and dignity. We must overcome prejudices that prevent them from continuing to participate and contribute to our societies. We must find ways to help families to care for their parents and grandparents.

The United Nations can be mobilized to assist governments and specialized agencies in making this generational change. With our unsurpassed data bases and networks of experts, the UN can help identify and share the policies and rights that can guide national efforts, and spare governments the painful process of reinventing the wheel.

For these reasons, I would like to recommend to the General Assembly that it consider the call by some Member States and you as activists of civil society for a convention on the rights of older persons. I believe the General Assembly, uniquely representative of virtually all nations, must use its authority to support these types of bold initiatives that continue to expand and strengthen our human rights.

Let us provide the impetus to mobilize awareness regarding the rights of older persons. We all have a part to play and the growing and vibrant constituency around older persons makes it an issue that will soon find its rightful place in our common agendas. Thank you.