

Sustainable ageing: Concept, dimensions, and policy levers

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1. Introduction: from “active/productive/successful” ageing to “sustainable” ageing

Population ageing refers to the demographic shift toward an increasing proportion of older individuals within a population, driven by declining fertility, increasing life expectancy, and, in many contexts, migration dynamics. This transition often results in a shrinking or stagnant total population size, a reduced share of younger cohorts, and a growing share of older adults, with profound implications for social, economic, and political systems.

Against this backdrop, sustainable ageing can be broadly defined as a multidimensional and forward-looking approach to ageing that ensures the well-being, autonomy, and inclusion of older adults today, while safeguarding the social, economic, political, and ecological resources needed to support future generations. Sustainable ageing lies at the intersection of individual quality of life, social equity, and environmental resilience, and calls for policies and practices that adapt to and anticipate the consequences of demographic and social change across multiple domains.

The concept of sustainable ageing builds on established models of ageing well. Classic models include successful ageing, which emphasizes low disease, high functional capacity, and active engagement (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), and active ageing, focusing on continued participation in social and economic life (WHO, 2002). Baltes and Baltes (1990) similarly describe successful ageing as a dynamic balance of strengths and losses across the lifespan, while Bowling and Iliffe (2006) note these models stress physical, cognitive, and social dimensions. Productive ageing extends this by viewing older adults as societal assets (Morrow-Howell et al. 2001): Kerschner and Pegues (1998) argue older people “are repositories of wisdom and experience and important assets for society” who can contribute via work, volunteering, and other roles. Recent frameworks have evolved “healthy ageing” as a unifying concept: WHO (2020) defines it as “the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age”. Functional ability is about having the capabilities that enable all people to be and do what they have reason to value. This replaces the narrower active ageing policy framework of 2002 (WHO, 2002) and underscores a life-course approach to health and capability. Thus, sustainable ageing draws on these multidimensional models, emphasizing that ageing well involves staying healthy, socially engaged, and adaptive, which in turn reduces burdens on health and social systems (WHO, 2020; Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Sustainable ageing broadens these models by integrating multidimensionality, intergenerational fairness, and a forward-looking perspective. While previous models of ageing emphasized individual characteristics and behaviors, sustainable ageing shifts the focus towards the societal level. It is explicitly a *whole-of-society* agenda that spans *all ages* and interlinks economic, social, healthcare, technological, political and cultural domains, with clear connections to the Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDG 3 on health and SDG 10 on inequality).

2. What makes population ageing *sustainable*? A multidimensional, intergenerational and forward-looking, lens

A truly multidimensional and intersectional concept

Sustainable ageing is *intrinsically multidimensional and intersectional* with multiple dimensions intrinsically influencing each other. Economically, it means pension and labour-market arrangements that reflect longer lives and heterogeneous careers, enable longer participation where health allows, and recognize the (short- versus long-run) role of migration.

Socially and in care/health systems, sustainable ageing requires guaranteed access to quality services and recognition of rising long-term care needs without over-burdening families—especially women—with care obligations that depress labour-force attachment; this underscores tight links between social and economic spheres.

Technological change (digitalisation, AI, robotics) can facilitate ageing in place, remote care, and access to services—*provided* innovations are accessible across ages and social groups. Technology itself has environmental footprints and efficiencies; acknowledging both leads directly to the environmental dimension, where ageing intersects with climate risks (e.g., heat waves) as well as with energy use, housing, and urban form.

Sustainable ageing is also political and cultural. Politically, it presupposes an *intergenerational pact* backed by democratic consent and fair public resource allocation across cohorts; this demands attention to age-stratified voting, participation, and opinion formation. Culturally, it requires countering ageism (against old *and* young), fostering intergenerational dialogue, and respecting cohort-specific experiences.

To make the ageing process socially sustainable not only should there be the recognition that multiple dimensions are involved; it is also crucial to understand the interdependencies among them. For example, a healthy population depends not only on individual behaviors but also on supportive environments and social systems as recognized in the healthy ageing framework (WHO, 2020).

Intergenerational fairness and the family nexus

Placing families at the core clarifies both opportunities and tensions. Families mediate macro shocks and policies at the micro level, and welfare states can mandate, block, generate, lighten, or compel interdependence between generations.

From a sustainable-ageing perspective, *trade-offs* are explicit: e.g., encouraging grandparental childcare may boost fertility or parental employment but can increase older adults' time burdens; extending working lives can strengthen pension sustainability but constrain family care availability. Recognizing and managing such tensions—rather than assuming frictionless complementarities—is central.

Intergenerational sustainability, however, goes beyond links within the families to stress the tensions and mutual influences —financial, material, emotional, political— between different age cohorts of individuals, the older people of today and those of tomorrow.

Forward-looking by design

Sustainable ageing is a forward-looking framework, which is the most distinctive feature of the model compared to the established models of ageing well. Population ageing can be sustainable only if the

wellbeing of today's older adults is secured while *preserving* resources—economic, human, environmental—for tomorrow's older adults. Sustainable ageing emphasizes preparedness over reaction, and life-course investments that reduce late-life deficits.

2. Sketching the policy agenda to move towards a sustainable ageing

Sustainable ageing requires a forward-looking, systemic perspective. It implies planning for long-term demographic trends and avoiding short-term fixes. It also urges policy interventions to account for interdependences among policy levers and to respect intergenerational equity. Below we sketch some examples of sustainable ageing actions.

Economic and labour-market design

- Flexible, life-course-sensitive pensions that adapt to heterogeneous careers and later retirement where health permits; actuarially transparent pathways that maintain adequacy and intergenerational equity.
- Work–care reconciliation for mid-/late-career adults (men and women), recognizing the interlock between care needs and labour supply; avoid defaulting to families—particularly women—as primary caregivers due to service shortfalls.

Health and long-term care systems

- Integrated care models that prevent/slow functional decline; long-term care provision that supports dignity and limits unprotected family load.
- Age-friendly environments that are also child-friendly—aligning with a whole-society approach rather than age-siloed design.

Technology with inclusion and resilience

- Universal digital inclusion as infrastructure *and* capability: invest in access, usability, and *skills* so technology complements—not replaces—informal support. Design for assisted/proxy use without entrenching dependency; monitor trust and uptake in e-administration.
- Environmental co-benefits: incentivise technology that reduces energy/water use and supports ageing in place; plan for climate risks that disproportionately affect older adults.

Environmental and spatial planning

- Align housing, transport, and urban policy to reduce vulnerability to heat/cold and to lower emissions associated with an ageing housing stock; consider multidimensional actions blending built and technological environments to target investments.

Political and cultural levers

- Combat ageism (including against the young) and foster intergenerational dialogue; link interventions to civic participation and voting across age groups.
- Governance across ministries: sustainable ageing is interdependent by nature, requiring coordinated action across finance, labour, health, housing, environment, education, and digital portfolios.

Measurement and learning

- Move from single-domain indicators to *multi-domain dashboards* that capture trade-offs and co-benefits; build on tools like the Active Ageing Index (Zaidi et al. 2018) to spur policy action and benchmarking.
- Evaluate in terms of *implementation sustainability*: policies that are age-friendly and durable (institutionally and fiscally).

3. Conclusion

Sustainable ageing reframes population ageing as a *whole-society, all-ages, intergenerational* project that is simultaneously economic, social, technological, environmental, political, and cultural. It is future-oriented and fairness-oriented, acknowledging trade-offs and insisting on integrated responses rather than siloed fixes.

A family perspective clarifies how policies shape interdependence across generations—sometimes lightening obligations, sometimes unintentionally compelling them—and why the effectiveness and equity of reforms hinge on these mediated pathways.

By grounding ageing policies in sustainability principles (economic, social, environmental), countries can aim for ageing that is not only longer and healthier for individuals, but also equitable and affordable for society at large.

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