Perspectives and Challenges of European Ageing

Abstract

Improving the life quality of the European population is an important goal set in the cohesion policy, which is valid for the whole of the European Union’s territory. The cohesion policy of the European Union strengthens the kind of European solidarity through which geographically different social groups receive similar opportunities to improve their life quality and well-being. To reach this positive goal, the accessibility programs created by the European Union are highly important. The ideology of European accessibility determines complex strategic objectives and imbues these with useful content. The group of elderly people is one of society’s accessibility groups, whose representation will be more and more prominent in the future due to European demographic changes. Member states of the European Union have different approaches to the growing role of seniors in society, which is partly due to their cultural traditions. These viewpoints may provide different answers regarding the processes of ageing, however, the appropriate care of the elderly is a joint social responsibility of each of the member states. The shifting dialogue between generations can be viewed as a positive change, nevertheless, other environmental influences can affect the processes. These environmental impacts can be factors which contribute to ageing. The complex research results of these show that, despite previous stereotypes, during the biological ageing of the human body there is a healthy ageing process in which activity, vitality, success, happiness, well-being and the quality of life play a substantial role. We have studied a group of seniors who have exceptionally active lives and extraordinary results in Hungary. The results of this Hungarian group of seniors show which factors and individual impressions in a local environment contribute to a high-level life quality, which can be an outstanding example and model to be followed by other European senior groups.

**Keywords:** ageing, Europe, quality of life, well-being, accessibility
Introduction

According to the report of UNWTO, members of society are more affected by accessibility through disabilities than previously thought by experts. At least 15 percent of the global population is affected by some form of disability, which means that this affects as much as 1 billion people worldwide (UNWTO, 2013). This data is new in every way, which makes it a key to this research to clarify that regarding people with disabilities, the definition of disability is a physical or mental state, in which the disadvantage of physical impairment, physical delimitations in certain actions and intention of participating in certain life situations is problematic. The members of accessibility groups in society can be manifold due to the variety of disabilities, which in some cases may not be evident. The reinterpreted groups who are given the accessibility adjective are nowadays made up of, besides the medically disabled, groups of elderly, single-parent families, disadvantaged people and those looking for a safe environment, and are quite susceptible towards sustainable and quality services (Zsarnoczky, 2018a).

From the perspective of how easily available quality life is, accessibility groups are present in roughly the same economic segments as the rest of the population, moreover they can over-represent themselves in some of these segments due to their existing conditions. The European databases of statistics (EUSTAT, 2018) show that in some member states of the European Union there is no difference in the local particularity and quality of disabilities, the alteration lies entirely within the available environmental specificities. It can be concluded from the data that the European member states are at different stages of development with regard to the available accessibility services. They comply with the general professional expectations laid down in the mandatory European directives and regulations, however, in their practical applications, some states perform better than others.

The European accessible act and silver economy phenomenon

Beginning in 2015, the European Union gave a significant future role to the phenomenon of the silver economy through the accessible act (EC, 2018). There is an increase in the number of people over 50 years in the population of the European Union. Within this increasing tendency, based on their biological sex, there are more and more women in society. With positive economic and technological advances, it is expected that the number of ageing elderly will also increase. According to the current definition, members of the silver economy are individuals over the age of 50 who are considered to be a stable purchasing power, and independently make up a consumer segment expanding to almost the entire economy (Fig. 1.).
Members of this group include pensioners as well as people who receive an allowance, revenue or other benefits. The silver economy is a niche economic segment, where consumer habits and preferences may differ and have unique patterns. Typically, consumer habits and consumer preferences do not equal a real choice. The consumer takes into consideration a myriad of factors when making real purchasing choices. These are influenced by their life quality, experiences, cultural habits and inner value system, which take into account goods with practical value, income and prices. In this consumer segment, the amount of income and the prices of goods or services restrict the possibilities of choice. Contrary to the definition of members of the silver economy, European elderly people cannot be considered a largely homogenous group and are not comprised exclusively of people of retirement age living on a pension or other benefits. Therefore, it can be concluded that elderly people can be defined in many ways. For example, there can be significant differences in the age of elderly people, through which we can group them into “younger” and “older” categories with independent generational traits. The right to an appropriate quality of life and well-being is as important in the consumer segment of elderly and accessibility groups as it is for other generational segments. To summarize: the importance of accessibility groups’ and elderly’s economic segment can be defined as one encompassing members’ every economic activity, the goods and services relating to it, as well as satisfying other needs accompanied by spending (Zsarnoczky, 2017).
The connection between life quality research and successful ageing

In the international scientific literature on life quality research, life quality and well-being are to this day concepts of similar meaning (Pinquart et al., 2000). While life quality can be objectively measured, the dimensions defining well-being can be measured and interpreted in many ways. In the beginning, researchers used a bottom-up and top-down approach to examine the field of life quality. Later on, they assessed through a unique research approach that a complete picture of the life quality of elderly people can only be created if the objective and subjective factors are taken into consideration and analyzed together (Diener, 1984). The current international research on life quality feature, next to the general objective side, offers a strong presence on the new, subjective approach. In this unique theory, subjective factors can be indicators applicable to persons or smaller social groups (Riva et al., 2014). Research based on the aforementioned logic on the subjective quality of life can help in a more precise definition of how people value their lives, can show their level of satisfaction with their lives, factors of happiness, as well as the relative lack of negative dispositions and sentiments.

A part of gerontology research also considers subjective factors, including environmental influences. According to research, ageing generations will have a considerable amount of empathic attitude and will strive to create a harmony of body, mind and soul. The ageing European generations have started to recognize the importance of a healthy lifestyle in obtaining this harmony. As part of the process, the active elderly people regularly do physical exercise and activities which also guarantee their mental health. This activity also results in giving the participants a sense of success and sets an example to other elderly people. It is vital, regarding successful ageing of the human body, to define the rules which apply to everybody without exception. According to the findings of gerontology professionals, the ageing of the human body is to be considered a normal biological process. It is not necessarily accompanied by bodily dysfunctions or sickness. It is important, however, to draw attention to the fact that the negative physiological or environmental changes associated with ageing can increase disposition to diseases and accidents. Accordingly, a role-playing factor can be any environmental factor which plays a part in the everyday life of the elderly (Fig. 2).
To achieve the most accurate results in the research of life quality, applying a complex research approach is vital. Results must show personal traits, personal life situations, social situation, the accessible social services, the physical factors surrounding an individual, the system of accessible medical services and a total of economic factors. Through such a complexity of research, a general model can be established, encompassing the positive comfort zones of the elderly.

**Political measures aimed at helping senior citizens in a strongly affected member state of the EU**

The framework and main areas of political measures toward senior citizens are determined by the National Aging Strategy (heretofore NAS) developed almost a decade ago. The NAS became effective via Parliamentary Resolution (81/2009. X.2.) introduced by the Minister of Social Issues and Labour in Hungary. The completion of the strategy coincided with international analyses and strategy-design efforts warranted by global trends (Figure 3).

The most important component of the given strategy was a long term action plan utilizing the results of comprehensive research efforts and analyses. The National Aging Strategy was based on the Senior Citizen Charter, certain components of the Governmental Senior Citizen National Action Plan, and the main tenets of the Four Year Interest Assertion Strategy of the National Pensioners’ Association along with other professional recommendations.
The strategy was prepared via a multi-step effort. The first phase included the exploration of the given situation, the listing of problems and the identification of areas in need of development followed by the implementation of complex tasks. The last segment forwards recommendations for the implementation process for 25 years spanning over governments and generations.

The long term plan of the NAS focuses on the following areas:

- raising the average life expectancy to catch up with the same figure of the European Union,
- increasing the number of years during which the given individual is healthy,
- increasing the sustainability of active life,
- income security for the elderly,
- the promotion of social integration,
- the harmonization of various services (health care, social welfare, education, culture etc.) with the needs and interests of the elderly,
- supporting the lifelong learning efforts of the elderly via providing access to digital educational materials,
strengthening the conditions of active ageing implying not only physical activity or retention of one’s position on the labour market, but active participation in social, cultural, and community life,

raising awareness of the management of the ageing process already at a younger age,

a shift of perspective regarding the economic and societal attitudes and experiences related to the ageing process.

Following parliamentary ratification, the implementation of the National Aging Strategy commenced in various fields. The problems and challenges emerging during the realization of said objectives highlighted the specific features and respective differences concerning political measures addressing the elderly. It was revealed that access to the respective services can differ according to various settlement or community types. While in cities social services are readily available, in smaller communities, or isolated farms the selection is much lower if existing at all. One crucial finding of the individual situation analyses was that in settlements with lower population or isolated communities the available social and other types of infrastructure are not at the same level of quality.

Consequently, to explore and identify problems at the local level, the priority was shifted to such activities which are comparable to each other. Therefore, such issues as guaranteeing equal rights, communication, availability of information, education, lifelong learning, health care, rehabilitation, health and welfare services, pension, employment, general education, recreation, leisure time activities, equal opportunity, and prevention of social exclusion suggested the development of a management perspective related to ageing. Thus the implemented local ageing management models were expanded to include volunteerism, modelling of one’s life span and cooperation.

It is crucial from a research perspective that this type of management-oriented or system-level approach facilitates the exploration of the life quality and well-being of separate groups. If such processes result in the determination of the individual variables, personalized services could be offered to the elderly living in remote areas or at the margin of society. At the same time, the examination of the respective geographical or spatial data should be coupled with the analysis of domestic demographic processes. Such efforts can serve as the foundation of effective social systems in the future.
The action plan of Social Agenda

As a form of an action plan on the part of the European Union, a Social Agenda was developed. This document, on the one hand, has a gap-filling function while laying down the foundation of the national ageing strategies. The significance of the effort is found in the fact that it established the long-term strategic objectives of well-being, solidarity, and security. As a result of the analysis, several concepts including legal and financial security and the protection of privacy rights, were defined. The overall aim of the Agenda was to protect against all potential hazards facing the elderly, including physical and psychological abuse, violence, and financial exploitation (Eurostat 2019).

The Agenda directed the attention of stakeholders and decision-makers to several compound or multisided factors. A survey based on research results confirmed that 45% of people qualified as disabled are over the age of 60. Such findings pointed out that the use of medical assistance devices coincides with the need for special services related to vision, hearing, mobility, movement, and taking public transportation. A new directive addressed the protection of the human rights and safety of people struggling with mental decline or dementia associated with the ageing process.

This progressive strategy and the related programs launched processes in the past decade which made the principle of European solidarity and equal opportunity a decisive component of everyday life. While increasing feedback and the respective data indicate the success of the initial program, a continuous steady commitment and determination is a prerequisite to the sustainability or maintenance of positive results and procedures. Although not much was mentioned about the role of the non-governmental sector, it plays a significant and essential role in the processes taking place between the state and the individual (Verschraegen et al. 2016). The human service aspect of society is different from that of the rigid and technocratic public administration system. Conversely, civilian associations emerging from various layers of society are capable of maintaining a dialogue between the state and the individual and can represent and reconcile the respective needs and interests, as well.

Interactive solidarity among elderly

The effectiveness of social services and the concept of social fairness mutually reinforce each other. The harmonization, reconciliation, and modernization of human service systems bear relevance to all layers of society ranging from the youth to the elderly. Consequently, such aspirations should guide the improvement of social fairness, justice, and cohesion (Khun et al.
The faster ageing-related tasks can be performed, the more successful can a developmental effort become along with increased client satisfaction. During the implementation of such measures, the elderly should be presented with a wider selection, as people can rely on their own experience to decide which services they need. To provide such transparent opportunities, not only does the selection of available services have to be broadened, but also the respective standards.

The protection and service systems of a well-functioning society can help in the formation of a more diverse image of ageing, reflecting the given social context in a more reliable manner and thereby reducing the prevalence of stereotypical views concerning the elderly. Political measures considering the needs of the elderly must reiterate the positive aspect of biological ageing via strengthening the channels of social communication and the adaptation of appropriate legal practices. A proper strategy can determine quality-based and professional objectives that can prevent the social exclusion of the elderly.

The knowledge, wisdom, and skills of senior citizens should be integrated into the service systems to promote the social acceptance of ageing. Older people can and should be treated as crucial resources regardless of their background, activity, or respective service-related needs. Consequently, their contribution to the public good also has to be recognized. While from a strategy design point of view the elderly cannot be considered a homogeneous group, modern and appropriate elderly policy principles should treat life quality and well-being as equally accessible rights for everyone involved (Zsarnoczky 2020).

Photo 1. After the authors’s lecture together with the advanced senior academy members at the College of Tomori, Budapest, Hungary. Source: M. Zsarnoczky
The respective social and cultural transfer should reinforce the social importance and value of the elderly. Reaching the age of retirement leads to ample free time and the way such leisure time is utilized can greatly determine not only the self-image and social position of the given individual, but also their family members. The active and useful spending of one’s newly free time can become an important means of self-actualization and the promotion of cohesion and positive social identity from the standpoint of both the individual and community. The fulfilment of previous life goals or participation in civic organisations can help the transfer of elderly people from the labour market to the private sphere, ease the exit from the world of work, and promote the social integration of the aged along with the acknowledgement of their efforts in a narrower social circle. In addition to the positive aspects of acknowledgement for a volunteering activity, intergenerational connections can be strengthened, along with that of the transfer of knowledge and experience, and the passing of values and creative problem-solving methods to the younger generation.

Objectives

The present research has been preceded by a survey about the touristic habits of elderly people. In my former research, the societal and social status of North-Hungarian elderly has also been partially dealt with. When processing the results, some of the most important problems experienced by the elderly in the region have come to surface. Most of the participants have mentioned loneliness, vulnerability, confinement and the emptiness of retirement years as the principal influencing factors of their life situation. The Northern-Hungarian region is similar to the present research location of South Hungary, with regards to the region’s societal and social construction and disadvantaged background. During the works preceding the research, it became evident that there is one significant difference between the elderly’s lives of the two regions. This prominent difference was in the activities of the elderly people, the number of senior clubs and a different system of senior counsels.

The research questions have therefore been determined by the relation between subjective life quality and senior clubs. The effect of these on elderly life have also been examined. To get the most accurate information, the location of the study has been chosen to be Nagykanizsa county town in the region of South Transdanubia. This region has the highest number of senior clubs in the region, based on tradition, best practice and considering the number of its population. In the primer research 16 interviews were conducted with key actors who define the elderly activities of the county town and professionals. The interviews were followed by a questionnaire distributed among 500 people over 60 years old, also being the
most active members of senior clubs. The research consists of two different work stages, and this paper aims to present the results of the first stage. In the next part of the research a survey will be conducted with 500 people over the age of 60, who are permanent residents of Nagykanizsa and not members of any senior clubs. This way further interesting correlations can be examined between the two focus groups.

Social factors influencing life quality received great emphasis in the questionnaire analyses. These included happy relationships, family, friendships, financial stability, positive environment and the opportunity for quality spending of leisure time. The analysis of data and assertion of subjective life quality can continue on several levels adhering to the objectives of the research. During the interviews, for example, some of the answers from creators of senior clubs indicated that there is a general pattern which can be influenced by various specific factors. From the perspective of measuring life quality, levels of satisfaction with these specific factors can influence the positive acceptance of local elderly’s subjective well-being. These specific factors can be how frequently they take advantage of cultural services, the differing age of members and their social-financial status – all showing unequivocal differences.

In the course of the secondary research, the available databases and many international professional works of literature were consulted and processed. The international life quality research has many impressive methodologies and various results. We can generally enlist in the objective research methods the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the Human Development Index (HDI), the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) and the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI). The literature considers as subjective methods the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), the Health-Related Quality Life (HRQL), the EuroQol Group EQ-5D index, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), and the Well-being Index (WBI). There are research methods which are viewed as mixed methods among researchers. Mixed methods include the definition of satisfaction with life or the analysis of changes in pleasant and unpleasant feelings like the Happy Planet Index (HPI), the Better Life Index (BLI) and the Quality Adjusted Life Years (QUALY).

Results

The research was conducted in the county town of Nagykanizsa, in the Southern-Transdanubian region, as this town has the most senior clubs (28) and an independently functioning senior council. A study from the secondary research determined that, according to the European Union’s definition of silver demography (older than 50 years), 42 percent of Nagykanizsa’s
permanent population is part of the active silver society (Table 1.). The research concluded that the elderly clubs have members prominently older than 60 years, who are mostly part of the fragile and dependent silver society. Therefore, to further specify the research, 29 percent of the total population were brought into focus, which considering proportionality, is characteristic to Hungary’s demographic trends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent population of Nagykanizsa</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older than 50 years total (42%)</td>
<td>20832</td>
<td>8477</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11606</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>6249</td>
<td>2857</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3392</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older than 60 years total (29%)</td>
<td>13734</td>
<td>5520</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8214</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>7364</td>
<td>3285</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4279</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>4184</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2337</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>1768</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90+</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Distribution of the permanent population of Nagykanizsa
Source: County city of Nagykanizsa

The examination of elderly people’s leisure time was an important part of the questionnaire analysis in the assessment of life quality. Based on the three factors determined, spending time with companionship (Fig. 4.), taking advantage of leisurely services (Fig. 5.) and the assessment of the financial situation (Fig. 6.), we can observe various specific codetermining processes.

![Figure 4. Who do you spend your free time with?](image-url)
Figure 5. Which services/service providers do you take advantage of in Nagykanizsa from the below?

Figure 6. How does your financial status influence the way you spend your leisure services

The Nagykanizsa subjective life quality research has determined how the members of senior clubs assess their lives, how they show their satisfaction, what are the factors of their “happiness” and the positive effects of having a club life. Senior club members of Nagykanizsa love spending time with others so much that they spend most of their free time (78%) with each
other. In this common free time, they enjoy doing and discussing culture, health, beauty and travel, which they consider parts of social life. Their financial status does not affect their participation at events, only some programs are affected by it. Naturally, there is a myriad of other factors which can be examined to find connections between the answers listed above.

Thanks to the results obtained in Nagykanizsa, it was possible to create an extended successful aging model (Fig. 7.), which is based in part on our previous research results, but already takes into account the preferences of club members. In the elderly care processes, additional research directions can be successfully deduced from this model, which can become both usable and a good model for other social organizations or ageing programs.

![Figure 7. Extended Successful Aging model with the result of the research in Nagykanizsa](source)

Figure 7. Extended Successful Aging model with the result of the research in Nagykanizsa
Source: (Zsarnoczky 2018b)

The next stage of the research, which will be conducted in a region without senior clubs, will open up new dimensions to help understand the differing subjective life quality of elderly groups more clearly. Club members who were asked about it confirmed that the local elderly clubs and senior council, with their various possibilities, have a very positive effect on their lives and happiness. These constitute the only chance for social interactions. The supposed link between the senior clubs and subjective life quality has therefore proven to be true and is accompanied by positive results within the local club members.
Conclusion

Various social groups are much more sensitive to the consequences of political compromises made behind closed doors, the growth of the digital economy, the emergence of the Industry 4.0 phenomenon, the main trends of the Asian economic miracle along with the uncertain international perspective. Unfortunately, a potential lack of social cohesion and insufficient priority on the needs of marginalized social groups professing differing values could lead to the exclusion of the most important actor from the European political process, the citizen of the member states.

Nevertheless, a certain phenomenon potentially applicable to all social groups has emerged. The promotion of accessibility can lead to greater use of community spaces, parks, and public transport options while strengthening the connection between the individual and the environment. The most important indicator of appropriate life quality and well-being is the improvement of the immediate environment. Appropriate housing and access to services can guarantee physical and mental fitness. Furthermore, along with adequate health care, cultural and community activities and services can play a role in this process.

Consequently, the recognition of the advantages of the education process and lifelong learning can lead to a perspective prioritising life quality and improved well-being generating a positive impact on ageing. The chances of self-actualization can be increased in old age via a holistic perspective implying community support, high-quality leisure time activity, the formation of a healthy environment, and safe residential surroundings.

The appropriate life quality and accessible well-being are of great importance in the cohesion policy of the European Union. The reinvented concept of European accessibility includes heterogeneous groups, consisting of various social layers. The elderly groups and the concept of accessibility are more and more important as a result of European demographic trends. Several challenges come with the ageing of European society which is comprehensible through the complex approach of life quality. Objective life quality indicators have started to be replaced by subjective life quality indicators and mixed systems of research methods. In the case study, it is worth taking into account the relationship between specific factors, through which the dimensions of individual connections can be more complete. From the primary examination of members of the Nagykanizsa elderly clubs, it can be shown that the founding of elderly council and the leisure activities provided by the clubs play a positive role in the
societal and social interactions of elderly people. We can assume, therefore, that the happiness factors of elderly people can be assessed and better understood through the subjective factors of life quality.

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Works Cited


