

# Promoting the political and social participation of older people

## Recommendations for action

by the symposium of November 4/5, 2010 in the Körber Foundation

A community is as good as the possibilities its citizens have to participate in it; only a state in which all groups can participate will inspire confidence. In an ageing society, the potentials and the participation of older people in particular are needed. They must be permitted to assume co-responsibility for shaping public life. This was the undivided opinion of the participants in the symposium entitled »Political and social participation of older people« held on November 4/5, 2010 at the KörberForum in Hamburg. How can the potentials of the older generation be utilised? What moves older adults to participate politically and socially? And how does society foster the participation of older people? In an interactive analysis of four international projects in practice, in panel discussions and workshops, a ten-point plan was worked out as a recommendation for action. The project »Potentials of Age« is a collaborative effort by the Institute of Gerontology at the University of Heidelberg and the Körber Foundation.

**1.** The participation of older people requires differentiated age images. Older people must not be seen and addressed as a homogeneous group. Instead of discriminating against old age, we need an image which reflects both the potential and the vulnerability of this life phase.

**Older people want to participate.** In recent years, older people have become more and more involved: their civil engagement is growing measurably, and political protestors in Germany are also getting older, as shown by the example of Stuttgart 21. As the student protestors of 1968 now go into retirement, a generation is redefining old age, approaching political participation in different ways to previous cohorts. This requires a society which is receptive to this assumption of responsibility – and which wants and accepts the active participation of older people.

**2.**

**3.** Social and political participation needs a framework. The state strengthens the participation of older people by facilitating political participation processes, encouraging older people to participate, creating an engagement-friendly infrastructure and securing the stability of social networks. The inclusion and codetermination of (older) citizens should be seen by administrations not as an onerous obligation, but as an opportunity: older people are experts on matters that concern themselves, and they also develop innovative solutions. In Germany, democratically legitimised bodies for the active participation of older people should be legally regulated and taken seriously in the federal states and municipalities.

**4.** **Municipalities are the central sphere of activity for the participation of older people.** The involvement of older people takes place on a predominantly local level. Older people act more effectively in areas with which they are familiar and which affect them directly. Decision-makers are called upon to create openings for the participation of older people in municipalities and to provide elected senior representatives with room for manoeuvre. They should also have an open mind to new forms of citizen participation, e.g. the testing of participatory budgets, planning cells or community organizing.

The participation of older people must not be seen as a stopgap for social fault lines. Politicians should not reduce the assumption of responsibility by older people to a stopgap function for the performance of state tasks, but include their creative resources in social processes of organisation and reform.

**5.**

**6.** **Participation is a question of equal opportunity.** The social and political participation of older people is dependent on their education, social status and health – older people need education facilities and access to social security in order to participate.

It is possible to empower older people to participate. Older people can be motivated and enabled to exercise political and social responsibility in codetermination bodies and participation processes through role models, qualification, recognition or networks.

**7.**

**8.** **Participation provides quality of life.** Responsible, active participation allows a personality to develop – also in old age. Participation makes people complete, it means social inclusion for older people and improves their quality of life. Experiencing oneself as a part of public life affects one's emotional and cognitive development. Older people also do not lose this ability to develop.

One of the motives for the readiness of older people to participate is generativity. Older people also want to participate in society because they want to leave something lasting behind and to make their skills usable for coming generations. Their actions thus correspond to the principle of generativity. The participation of older people is not just a means of representing their own interests. It is worthwhile incorporating the expertise and contributions of older people locally into all urban planning measures and for the benefit of all generations.

**9.**

**10.** **For decision-makers, the participation of older people means conceding power.** Involving older people in planning and organisation processes means more than isolated surveys or consultations. It is also about granting them a controlling function over the process as a whole.