



Kulturaren
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Executive summary

Culture and active ageing



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Executive summary

The ageing of the population is an unavoidable factor in any analysis of the current sociodemographic landscape, particularly in terms of future projections. Its impact on key aspects of social structure positions it as one of today's greatest challenges.

Increased longevity compels a rethinking of social, political, and economic models to align with a rising trend in the Western world, with the aim of enabling older people to live purposefully and contribute to society with as much dignity as possible.

In the Basque Country, the declining birth rates show no signs of reversal; life expectancy is among the highest in Europe, and the average age of women at childbirth is also above the European average. Collectively, we rank among the EU countries with the most unfavourable demographic balance. Eustat reports that at the beginning of 2023, the Basque Autonomous Community had 520,079 residents aged 65 and over (23.7%), with a majority being women (57.1%), as seen across the EU. This population segment could grow by around 163,200 people, increasing its proportion to 29.3% by 2036 – over 6 percentage points more than in 2021. The greatest relative growth is expected among those aged 85 and over, projected to reach 126,700 people by 2036, an increase of 37,200 compared to 2021, representing 5.6% of the total population.

The labour market and employment, welfare, health, and education systems are directly affected by this ageing process, challenging the current model of welfare. This has created an urgent need for a systemic response to the demographic challenge by promoting strategies for full and healthy ageing.

In this context, the study aims to provide reflections on this reality, focusing on how culture can contribute to active ageing. Although not explicitly included in various global strategies, culture's intrinsic capacity to generate cognitive, emotional, expressive, and social benefits can significantly enhance active ageing policies, thereby improving the quality of life of the elderly population.

The study is structured into three main sections. The first section analyses the context, establishing the concept of ageing. It presents data and trends to raise awareness of the scale of its impact on society and characterises the primary features of this life stage. Since the 1990s, the WHO has adopted a European tradition model linking ageing with two positive, wellbeing-related concepts:

Healthy ageing, the continuous process of optimising opportunities to maintain and improve physical and mental health, independence, and quality of life throughout life.

Active ageing, based on the former, understood as the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age.

There is a notable relationship between activity, health, independence, and the possibility of ageing well, with a broad health concept emphasising biological, psychological, and social wellbeing. The WHO's concept of healthy ageing for the 21st century has been broadened to active ageing, encompassing not only health indicators but also the psychological, social, and economic factors that need to be considered from a wider, community-focused perspective that accounts for cultural and gender differences. This framework offers opportunities for cultural initiatives in this life stage.

The WHO highlights four specific aspects of this stage that require interventions to match the scale of the challenge they represent. Firstly, there is the diversity of health conditions characteristic of this stage. The range is much broader than at any other life stage, meaning we can encounter elderly individuals with physical and mental capacities similar to those of a young person, or the opposite - individuals with limitations in the earlier stages of this period. The challenge lies in reducing this diversity to extreme cases, pushing for strategies that overlook the possible gradient and complexity within this range of conditions.

Another crucial issue is that a significant part of these circumstances results from unequal living conditions. Family background, gender, or birthplace greatly influence health; furthermore, these potential disadvantages are cumulative over a lifetime. This implies that those with the greatest care needs in old age may also be those with the fewest resources to address them.

Some age-related discrimination is rooted in prejudices and stereotypes associated with old age, shaping attitudes toward elderly individuals. This is referred to as "ageism", whereby age fuels prejudices, associating old age with dependency, decline, or burden.

Finally, the study also considers the impact of changing family structures and intergenerational relationships. Today, more generations coexist than ever before, family units are smaller, and the number of people living alone is rising.

Demographic projections for the Basque Autonomous Community indicate a scenario that further intensifies some current ageing traits, with significant implications for current social structures and ways of life. Among the most significant trends are the increase in over-ageing, reduced feminisation in these later life stages, higher levels of education and income, a tendency to remain active in the workforce beyond the current retirement age, as well as changes in household composition, the growth of co-housing, and the professionalisation of caregiving.

The second section of the report summarises key strategies surrounding ageing. Strategies and plans exist at all levels of government, so a selection of the most prominent references has been made to establish the foundations for public policies in this area. The Basque Country also has an active agenda addressing the demographic challenge, ageing, and care needs at the Autonomous Community, territorial, and local levels.

The third section delves into the contribution of culture to active ageing. It begins by positioning culture strategically within this process and recognising the opportunity it represents. Ageing, as conceived today, is part of a positive paradigm built on the notion that older people are full rights-bearing individuals with critical capacity, engaged in a life process with opportunities for personal growth. In this way, active ageing links the concepts of health, independence, and participation, emphasising its impact on the quality of life and physical and mental wellbeing of older people.

Emerging strategies aim to promote activity as a foundation for maintaining functional capacity, the key to wellbeing, and they focus on participation, personal autonomy, community involvement, intergenerational practices, and more. These are central themes in reflecting on the value, benefits, and social impacts of culture. Cultural participation can become a privileged channel for navigating this life stage with full awareness and purpose, helping people live fully and do what matters most to them.

This section explores these ideas from a cultural perspective, asking how culture is positioned and reflected in the indicators of active ageing, what opportunities older adults' cultural participation offers to the cultural sector, and vice versa, what benefits cultural participation provides for a fulfilling experience of old age. Finally, it considers what elements need to be taken into account to optimise cultural policies in fully embracing the demographic challenge before us, considering two aspects: the content of cultural programmes and cultural policies as a whole.

The report concludes with final reflections on how culture fits into active ageing strategies, highlighting its positive contribution to enhancing wellbeing in this final life stage.

In line with the five pillars of the Basque Strategy for Older People, cultural participation is a necessary support for each and opens up a potential framework for collaboration in the triad of culture, health, and social services.

1. The first pillar aims to foster active citizenship through rights, participation, and friendly communities. Active cultural practices, whether through participation in cultural associations or engaging in expressive activities, support projects aimed at achieving a fulfilling life. The goal is to promote activities that foster not only participation but also a sense of belonging to something meaningful, in line with the principles of cultural rights.
2. The second pillar aims to facilitate transitions and life projects during this stage marked by significant personal changes. Cultural policies can help improve these transitions by providing support, guidance, companionship, and skill development. Lifelong learning emerges as a rich field for developing arts- and heritage-based proposals.
3. The third pillar supports anticipation, prevention, and the promotion of autonomy for older people. Although the benefits of cultural practices in this process were never in doubt, scientific evidence now substantiates them. Many studies focus on the elderly and the positive effects of specific cultural practices on preventing and treating dementia. Activities such as music, dance, singing, theatre, or visual arts provide a fertile ground for experimentation and are also effective in addressing unwanted loneliness.
4. Care policy and the proposal for a new model form the fourth pillar. Individuals, professionals, and families can find support through a network of local cultural services as an integral part of the comprehensive care model being pursued. This is one of the most invisible yet significant areas for implementing serious active ageing policies.
In addition to personal and social benefits, cultural practices offer much-needed respite for everyone involved in care.

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5. The fifth pillar focuses on promoting research and innovation, essential for better understanding the ageing process, seeking solutions, and designing policies that address significant, complex challenges. Advances are being made in designing digital solutions aimed at improving the health of older people. This is an avenue in which cultural content fits naturally, and which can reinforce innovative solutions from both a technological and social point of view that are designed in the future.

Culture must be part of this multidisciplinary research, as seen in emerging global projects. Its transformative power, both personally and socially, positions it as an indispensable framework for supporting active ageing policies. Currently, culture appears tangential in active ageing strategies. Just as the importance of physical exercise and healthy lifestyles is fully recognised for improving life at this stage, cultural practices should become part of routines and habits in the ageing process.



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