# Gerontechnology and NGOs in the field of ageing

Vappu T. Taipale MD PhD[a]

[a]Union for Senior Services, Finland; E: vappu@vapputaipale.fi

*V.T. Taipale, Gerontechnology and NGOs in the field of ageing. Gerontechnology 2014; 13(1):1-4;* doi:10.4017/gt.2014.13.1.002.00 **Background** Current mega-trends in the development of the world population are an aging population and people increasingly living alone in one-person households. The former trend has been known a long time already through demographic statistics, but politicians and governments have been slow to react. The latter, on the other hand, has tiptoed furtively into population devel-opment uninvited, below the political radar. Both trends create conditions that should be prac-tically addressed by those in charge. They demand broad-scale action with regards to social planning, the delivery of services and ensuring wellbeing. The needs created by both trends are clearly linked to gerontechnology and they emphasise its necessity. This editorial dis-cusses why and how cooperation could be developed. **Conclusion** Civil society reacts spontane-ously to citizens' needs. There are an abundance of NGOs in the world that work with the elderly and echo their thoughts and living situation. Gerontechnology could take a closer look at those NGOs and start or intensify cooperation with them. Cooperation would benefit both researchers and innovators and NGOs, both nationally and internationally. Members of ISG and researchers in the field of gerontechnology are strongly recom-mended to search partnership with NGOs.

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Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work with the elderly are primarily perceived as operating in the field of social issues, so their status at both national and international level is not as strong as e.g. organisations in the health and labour fields. For some reason a real global umbrella organisation that would connect NGOs in the field of ageing does not yet exist. As there is no United Nations (UN) global body of techni-cal expertise that would compare with e.g. the WHO and the ILO in the health and labour sec-tors respectively, international cooperation is not well enough developed. International Federa-tion of Ageing (IFA) was founded in the 70s and has a consultative status within United Nations. AARP, the pensioner´s organisation in the USA has about 40 million members, and exerts its influence internationally as well. The HelpAge International organisation represents quite a large global actor. However, the status of these international actors is not yet self-evident like e.g. international labour organisations, and their coverage is not yet sufficient with regards to the number of national member organisations.

**How the NGOs were created**
Civic organisations, non-governmental organisa-tions (NGOs), have been created to realise these needs through cooperation between individual citizens. Civic organisations bring together activ-ists, individuals who share a common conviction and a desire to act. The starting point for civic or-ganisations is often emancipatory action: when broad and perhaps radical renewal is required. The world's oldest active organisation is 'Free the Slaves', the roots of which apparently reach back to the 16th century. Global women's movements and the temperance movement also have a long history – and they can boast on many achieve-ments.

Nationally, the story of organisations that work with the elderly is very similar. Every place has elderly people in need of assistance, and a few activists – often women – who think that some-thing has to be done about the situation. Finnish organisations for the elderly began in the 1950s, when the country was poor and had been deci-mated by the war. A couple of energetic women began to collect money by selling postcards and organising small jumble sales, and within a few years the first service building opened its doors[1]. This endeavour was helped financially by the Finnish social innovation RAY, Slot Machine As-sociation, the national gambling operation which devotes all its profits to NGOs for promoting health and welfare in the country[2].

In 2012 a couple of women from Kyrgyzstan visited Finland. They had the same passion: el-derly people had to have better conditions. Kyr-gyzstan has a sparse population – the elderly must endure very tough conditions, especially in the winter. They have invented a special term

'winter poverty' to describe the phenomenon. In summer young people leave the country to work seasonally on farms or in the construction industry and they return in winter when the energy prices rise, there are no wages and they rely on the elderly women's meagre savings. In summer the conditions are more-or-less reasonable but poverty is harsh in winter[3].

## Examples worldwide
Almost every country has several organisations that work with the elderly. During my activities in the field of ageing I have become familiar with innumerable, differently focused, differently managed organisations and active, enthusiastic people.

In Kathmandu I got the possibility to meet Krishna M. Gautam and his organisation 'Ageing in Nepal', which published its own Internet magazine worth looking at[4]. This offers an interesting perspective on the conditions and beliefs of the elderly in that multi-coloured, multi-lingual land. ICT is in active use albeit that most older people live in poverty.

In El Salvador, country whose fulminant violence is somewhat more controlled due to the truce between state and local gangs, I have admired Olga Miranda and her organisation called Fusate[5]. There is a very broad national network that offers the elderly a wide range of services to promote wellbeing and contacts like meal services for those who need them and even simple technical aids.

In Kazakhstan a broad spectrum of civic organisations is growing with governmental help. In Mozambique HIV/AIDS has had a deep effect on demographic development as a large part of the potential labour force has succumbed to the disease in the prime of life and grandparents – grandmothers, in practice – have had to raise their grandchildren. International support is also needed in this case to help elderly people organise.

In many EU countries too, such as Latvia and Lithuania, there is the concept of a 'skipped generation' because people of a working age have had to emigrate to find employment and have left their children in the care of their parents[6]. This affects the living standard of grandparents and increases their need for help.

Civic organisations act as a reflection of people's feelings and as their mouthpiece. In 2012 in New York at the meeting of UN Commission for Social Development, the Ukrainian researcher Galina Poliakova presented her research[7], which she had carried out nationwide in local branches of

the organisation she had founded, called 'Turbota pro Litvih v Ukraini'[8]. Over 3,000 people were involved in the research, and it was very moving to hear the old people's thoughts on their own situation. When they were asked which service they had most faith in, their answer was: funeral services. A clear picture of society in all its naked glory!

In developed countries there is an abundance of organisations and they are firmly established, but in developing countries civic organisations have to do a lot of work just to keep their heads above water. The emancipatory duty of civic organisations can step on the toes of those in power and their situation in any country is not easy because the government does not necessarily look fondly upon free civic activity. Foreign financial support in particular can raise suspicions and create grudges.

## WHY COOPERATION?
Why should gerontechnology link with organisations for the elderly? Why should businesses get involved with the activities of grannies? Should universities and ministries become acquainted with volunteer actors in the field?

A common stumbling block of technology is that while wonderful and innovative products are developed and then put on the market, the use and spread of technology is primarily social. The social shaping of technology is a powerful process in which the implementation of the technology and learning to use and accept it happens partly rationally but mainly through social acceptance[9]. Civic participation brings older people into product development and product testing, which are important, but not easy. At its best, it is creating markets.

Many organisations run a very broad service delivery. For gerontechnologists, to know the systems and logistics of service delivery is important. Innovation development is moving towards the concept product-and-service, which integrates the devices and their use into service systems. Yet further there is the whole area of service design, which brings the user, the client, the consumer whatever she/he is called, closer to the planning and delivering of the innovations.

National organisations for the elderly and international ones too, need information about the possibilities and options of new technology to keep up-to-date and participate critically in evaluating the future. This means that there are prerequisites for genuine discussion. Organisations

buy devices and systems, but purchases should be based on sufficient information.

## How to cooperate?
Is it possible in a global context or in an individual country to have broad cooperation between civil society, organisations, care professionals and researchers? The answer is positive, but there is a need of willing actors, and initiators who understand the benefits.

Globally the cooperation of NGOs of older people is slowly moving forward because the demands of older people's rights. Global scientific organisations, like IAGG and ISG should play a partner role in the possible future Global Commission on Ageing.

ISG could be an excellent actor to raise the issue of cooperation with its own global network of gerontechnologists. This means encouraging individual researchers and research groups to search for not only individual older people into testing but more institutional contacts with relevant NGOs.

Regionally and nationally, companies and universities can make broad contact with senior citizens through civic organisations. This means just initiatives for cooperation, and then real partnership. In some countries there exist a forum for discussion between researchers, institutes, universities and NGO's. As the NGOs are close to the people, they have direct information regarding people's needs. They can also help and support old people to voice their own needs and act as interpreters in a maze of complicated professional jargon. But the NGOs as well have to be active in their contacts and not to overlook the scientific or business world.

In service delivery, there are countries, for instance Germany, where most of the services for the elderly are produced by civic organisations, while in Finland many service areas are part of the organisations' non-profit activities. Private activity in care for the elderly covers at least a third – and this in a country where public service delivery has a strong foothold. Profit-seeking companies, which are more and more often supranational, have detected the growing need for services for the elderly; so service delivery will create a market in which the technology on offer cannot be one-sided or old-fashioned: all modern applications are needed in these fields. Commercial and academic cooperation could be a natural part of the development of service activities.

## Technology needs older people
The mobile phone is a good example of technology that has spread quickly and answered a need, also a need of older people. The need for communication is everywhere, transcending borders between families, villages, cities and continents. Simple, easy, wireless technology is important. The cheapness of a device is a prerequisite for the global market. On the other hand, the development of technology is very fast, as we see in our social media news feeds, but development has its own natural lulls too. For the last 20 years I have heard speeches about 'internet on the skin' and about the concept of an 'internet of things', but there has been no noticeable important development over and above talk on the subject. The 'videophone', where two people would speak face-to-face, was invented back in the 1960s but has only recently become part of our reality. Easy-to-use speech-controlled devices are good for the elderly but touch-sensitive technology is growing, which can be difficult for the elderly due to their unstable motor skills.

Networking is the word of the moment. Wider networks would have a lot to offer gerontechnology and all those who work with it as amateurs, informal or formal carers, researchers and builders. Aging and technology together will create a successful union for further development of both markets and products. This issue of Gerontechnology will explore the field of informal and formal carers, the role of information technology in care and other relevant issues. A new well-being paradigm, about which Franco et al. write in this issue[10], gives momentum to new kinds of alliances.

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