What can local governments do for the elderly?

In Hungary, local authorities` main responsibilities are to manage elderly care and primary health care. However, addressing a broader set of challenges would be both desirable and accomplishable. The present publication of the Progressive Hungary Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation explores how local authorities could instead act by focusing on more urgent needs, outside of what is considered their traditional roles.

The Hungarian population is dramatically ageing, so much so that by 2030 a quarter of society will be above the age of 65. Considering that half of the adult population already has at least one elderly relative, it is clear that issues around elderly care do not only affect older individuals. Naturally, the elderly are an integral part of the society, thus their matters concern and affect the whole of the population.

The needs of the elderly, however, have been changing. The average life expectancy continues to rise and pensioners are increasingly more educated and healthy. Consequently, there is an increasing need for services, besides the already existing nursing homes. The most pressing needs are of those who require assistance to maintain a self-sufficient lifestyle with good health, as well as services aiming to reduce loneliness. This is not to mention the plethora of other vital issues around housing, commuting and poverty, which are all a pressing matter of safety for the elderly.

On the other hand, the changing characteristics of the retired population opens new doors for the local governments and communities. The skills and the expertise of the seniors can be utilised in many ways. Such an approach could offer retirees a community and a sense of belonging beside that of being a useful, helping member of the local community.

Besides improving the quality and scope of the existing services, there is an urgent need for establishing new types of utilities. Since for municipalities there is little possibility for acquiring more governmental help, thus the authors have offered an economic and free solutions as well. The recommended measures are based on a holistic, socially sensitive and sustainable tenet: For instance, (elderly) volunteers could be trained for help with homecare. Such a low-budget project would help loneliness on both sides and offer a useful and highly valuable occupation for pensioners. Organising IT courses by students for seniors is another cost-effective measure which in advance brings different age-groups together, thus builds cross-generational solidarity at an early age. Another proposal is to establish courses for jobseekers above the age of 50. Many are facing difficulties finding a (new) job at that age, since reintegration into the ever-changing job market is a massive challenge. An additional recommendation is to start fraud-prevention consultations to enhance the safety of the

elderly. Sadly there are many scams targeting the elderly which in effect create a feeling of uncertainty and loss of trust resulting in fear of leaving the house and of engaging with other people.

Regarding the more costly measures, offering a wider range of medical screening in order to prevent and detect common illnesses affecting the given age group would be essential. Further, reconstruction subsidies would help to establish safer living conditions, which in turn helps individuals to carry out a self-reliant lifestyle for longer and prevents a number of accidents. Additionally, authorities could and should offer bureaucratic assistance for the elderly. Lack of information, misinformation and lack of computer skills are huge hindrances which often inhibit pensioners from acquiring the welfare-support they are entitled to. There could be a communal transport service established for retirees, as they often have difficulties paying a taxi fee or using public transport. Finally, the establishing of temporary care homes could ease the weight on the hospitals. They would serve those who temporarily need care but shortly will be able to live self-reliantly again.