Towards equal opportunities in a society of all ages.

Medical advances in the last few decades have meant that people are living longer and having fewer children. As a consequence many industrialized countries are facing a demographic time bomb as ageing populations are increasingly relying on a smaller workforce to fund pensions. This combined with the current widespread practice in these countries of taking early retirement, is resulting in immense and unsustainable strain on pension systems.

The promotion of decent and productive employment is a powerful lever to mitigate the effects of population ageing on pension systems. A key challenge is to increase employment and participation of all population groups but especially for women, youth, migrants and older workers.

As such, many countries are seriously contemplating raising the age of retirement in order to increase pension revenues. The Barcelona Council set up a target for a progressive increase of about 5 years in the average exit age by 2010.

In parallel with these political developments there is also a growing voluntary movement amongst many older people to reject the stereotypes of old age, and to pursue more active lives both in the world of work and community.

What is the impact of older workers staying longer in the workplace on those young people trying to enter the labour market?

Young people are arguably more politically aware than ever before and are now asking that their voices be heard and that their roles be recognized on a range of social development issues. In relation to the employment issue, rather than being viewed as a target group for which employment must be found, youth are asking to be accepted as partners in the decision-making process including shaping and policies.

Some predict that the growing empowerment and independence of both younger people and the elderly point to a potential clash of generations and that by extending the working lives of the elderly, society is threatening the prospects of young people looking for work.

This does not have to be the case. Rather than being in conflict these two generations can assist and support each other:

Older workers can play a vital role in supporting new entrants in to the job market through the provision of advice and support through mentoring schemes, job clubs, and careers advisory services. Equally younger worker can play a key role in the re-training of older employees and the upgrading of skills, in areas such as Information and Communications Technology.

This panel will bring representatives of worker and employer organizations together with specialists on both youth employment and older workers issues to seek inter-generational solutions to employment challenges for all ages, races and genders.

- The importance of promoting employment for both young and old as a means to address the pension crises.
- The importance of skill development and lifelong learning to help youth to enter the labour market for the first time and to help older people to work longer if they wish.
- Combating age discrimination and changing attitudes among employers.
- The role of social dialogue on the above.
- Do extended working lives threaten the prospects of young people looking for work? How can we avoid a potential clash of generations and what can older and younger works learn from each other?