SUBMISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON THE ENJOYMENT OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS BY OLDER PERSONS

Prepared by ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL
South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo

1. Introduction of ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL and Context of South Kivu

ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL is a community-based, non-profit organization based in South Kivu, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Our mission is to promote, protect, and uphold the rights, dignity, health, and well-being of older persons, particularly those living in situations of poverty, displacement, conflict, disability, neglect, and social exclusion.

Through our community-based programmes, we provide psychosocial support, rights awareness, community consultations, advocacy, livelihood initiatives, and referrals to essential services. We work directly with older women and men in both urban and rural communities, giving special attention to those who are the most vulnerable.

South Kivu has experienced decades of armed conflict, insecurity, and repeated humanitarian crises. The recent escalation of violence, including the activities of the M23 armed group, has led to widespread displacement, loss of livelihoods, family separation, and increased humanitarian needs.

Older persons are among the populations most affected by these crises. Many are unable to flee because of age, illness, disability, or reduced mobility. Others are abandoned during displacement, excluded from humanitarian assistance, or left without access to healthcare, food, social protection, and family support.

Our organization also observes that older persons living with cognitive impairment, including memory loss and other age-related neurological conditions, face multiple forms of discrimination. In many communities, symptoms of cognitive decline are poorly understood and may be associated with harmful beliefs, including accusations of witchcraft. These misconceptions expose older persons—especially older women—to stigma, abuse, neglect, violence, and social exclusion.

Drawing on our direct experience with older persons and caregivers in conflict-affected communities, ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL is pleased to contribute to this call for inputs. We hope that our field-based observations and recommendations will support the work of the United Nations Independent Expert in advancing the human rights, dignity, autonomy, and participation of older persons worldwide.

2. Field Observations: The Reality of Older Persons with Cognitive Impairment in Conflict-Affected South Kivu

Based on our daily work with older persons in South Kivu, ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL has observed that older persons living with cognitive impairment face severe and multiple human rights challenges, which are significantly worsened by armed conflict and humanitarian crises.

Many older persons experiencing memory loss, confusion, dementia, or other age-related cognitive conditions do not receive a medical diagnosis or appropriate care. Access to specialized healthcare services remains extremely limited, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. As a result, cognitive impairment is often misunderstood by families and communities.

In some communities, behavioural changes associated with cognitive decline are wrongly interpreted as signs of witchcraft or supernatural influence. These misconceptions may lead to stigma, discrimination, abandonment, verbal abuse, physical violence, and social exclusion. Older women are particularly vulnerable to these harmful practices.

The ongoing conflict has further intensified these risks. During episodes of violence and forced displacement, many older persons with cognitive impairment are unable to flee because of reduced mobility, confusion, or dependence on family members. Some are left behind when families escape, while others become separated from their caregivers during displacement.

Those who reach displacement sites often continue to face significant barriers in accessing humanitarian assistance. Many struggle to obtain healthcare, medication, food, psychosocial support, or information because humanitarian programmes do not always consider the specific needs of older persons living with cognitive impairment.

Family caregivers also face enormous challenges. Years of conflict, poverty, and displacement have weakened traditional family support systems, leaving many caregivers without the financial resources, knowledge, or services necessary to provide appropriate care.

These realities demonstrate that older persons with cognitive impairment remain largely invisible in humanitarian responses despite facing some of the highest levels of vulnerability. Their autonomy, dignity, participation, and fundamental human rights require far greater recognition and protection at both national and international levels.

3. Case Study: An Older Woman Living with Cognitive Impairment in Izege Village, South Kivu

One case from Izege Village, Kaniola Groupement, Walungu Territory, South Kivu, illustrates the daily realities faced by many older persons living with cognitive impairment in conflict-affected communities.

ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL met an older woman whose memory had gradually deteriorated over several years. She frequently forgot the names of relatives, became disoriented, wandered away from home, and sometimes spoke incoherently. Her condition had never been medically assessed because no specialised health services were available nearby.

Within her community, these symptoms were not recognised as possible signs of cognitive impairment. Instead, some community members believed that she had become involved in witchcraft. As a result, she was subjected to

stigma, insults, and increasing social isolation. Some neighbours openly discouraged others from visiting or assisting her.

The insecurity affecting the region further worsened her situation. Repeated episodes of violence and displacement weakened family support and reduced access to healthcare and humanitarian assistance. Her relatives struggled to provide the continuous care she required while also trying to meet their own basic survival needs.

During community consultations facilitated by ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL, older persons and caregivers explained that this case was not unique. Similar situations have been reported in several communities across South Kivu, where cognitive impairment is poorly understood and older persons are exposed to discrimination, neglect, abandonment, and harmful traditional beliefs.

This case demonstrates the urgent need for greater public awareness, improved access to age-appropriate healthcare, stronger community protection mechanisms, and recognition of the rights, dignity, autonomy, and participation of older persons living with cognitive impairment.

This case illustrates that cognitive impairment should never become a reason for discrimination, abandonment, or violence. Older persons living with cognitive impairment must be recognised as rights-holders and protected through inclusive health, social protection, humanitarian, and legal systems that respect their dignity and human rights.

4. Main Challenges

Based on our experience in South Kivu, ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL has identified several major challenges that prevent older persons living with cognitive impairment from fully enjoying their human rights.

4.1 Limited Access to Diagnosis and Healthcare

Most older persons living with cognitive impairment have never received a proper medical assessment or diagnosis. Specialized neurological and geriatric services are scarce, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. As a result, many conditions remain untreated, leading to further deterioration of health and well-being.

4.2 Stigma and Harmful Beliefs

Cognitive impairment is often misunderstood within communities. Symptoms such as memory loss, confusion, or unusual behaviour may be wrongly associated with witchcraft or supernatural causes. These misconceptions contribute to discrimination, social exclusion, abandonment, psychological abuse, and, in some cases, physical violence.

4.3 Armed Conflict and Forced Displacement

The ongoing armed conflict in eastern DRC significantly increases the vulnerability of older persons. During displacement, older persons with cognitive impairment may become separated from their families, abandoned because of limited mobility, or unable to access humanitarian assistance and essential services.

4.4 Limited Humanitarian Inclusion

Although humanitarian actors provide vital assistance during emergencies, the specific needs of older persons with cognitive impairment are often overlooked. Emergency programmes rarely include age-sensitive measures, appropriate communication, or specialised support for older persons requiring continuous care.

4.5 Poverty and Weak Social Protection

Many families caring for older persons live in extreme poverty. They lack financial resources to obtain medical care, medication, transportation, or long-term support. At the same time, social protection mechanisms remain limited and insufficient to meet the growing needs of older persons.

4.6 Limited Awareness and Caregiver Support

Family members and community caregivers often receive little or no information about cognitive impairment. Without adequate knowledge, they may struggle to provide appropriate care or to distinguish medical conditions from harmful traditional beliefs.

5. Good Practices and Community-Based Responses

Despite the challenging context in South Kivu, ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL has developed community-based approaches to promote the dignity, participation, and protection of older persons, including those living with cognitive impairment.

5.1 Community Consultations

We regularly organize community consultations that provide older persons with a safe and respectful space to express their experiences, concerns, and priorities. These consultations ensure that their voices are heard and inform our advocacy and community interventions.

5.2 Awareness-Raising on the Rights of Older Persons

We conduct community awareness activities to promote respect for the rights and dignity of older persons. These sessions also help challenge harmful stereotypes and beliefs, including misconceptions that associate cognitive impairment with witchcraft or supernatural causes.

5.3 Family and Community Support

We encourage families and community members to strengthen solidarity with older persons who require additional care and support. Through dialogue and community engagement, we promote understanding, reduce stigma, and reinforce the role of families in protecting older persons.

5.4 Psychosocial Support and Referrals

Whenever possible, we provide psychosocial support to vulnerable older persons and their caregivers. We also facilitate referrals to available health and social services, recognizing that access remains limited in many conflict-affected areas.

5.5 Community Advocacy

Evidence gathered through our community consultations is used to advocate for greater recognition of the rights of older persons at local, national, and international levels. Our recent contribution to the United Nations Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG) reflects our commitment to ensuring that the lived experiences of older persons in South Kivu contribute to global human rights discussions.

5.6 Promoting Participation and Dignity

Our approach is guided by the principle that older persons are not merely beneficiaries of assistance but rights-holders. We seek to ensure that they actively participate in decisions affecting their lives and that all interventions respect their autonomy, dignity, and humanity.

6. Recommendations

Based on our field experience in South Kivu, ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL respectfully recommends that the United Nations Independent Expert encourage States, United Nations agencies, humanitarian actors, development partners, and civil society organizations to take the following actions:

6.1 Strengthen Recognition of Cognitive Impairment as a Human Rights Issue

Recognize cognitive impairment not only as a health condition but also as a human rights issue requiring legal protection, social inclusion, and respect for the dignity and autonomy of older persons.

6.2 Improve Access to Health and Care Services

Promote equitable access to age-friendly healthcare services, including early diagnosis, mental health support, rehabilitation, long-term care, and community-based services, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas.

6.3 Combat Stigma and Harmful Practices

Support national and community initiatives to raise awareness about cognitive impairment and eliminate harmful beliefs and practices, including accusations of witchcraft, discrimination, abuse, neglect, and violence against older persons.

6.4 Ensure Inclusion in Humanitarian Responses

Require humanitarian actors to systematically include older persons, especially those living with cognitive impairment, in emergency preparedness, humanitarian assistance, protection programmes, and recovery efforts. Humanitarian responses should be age-inclusive, accessible, and responsive to their specific needs.

6.5 Support Family Caregivers

Develop policies and programmes that provide training, psychosocial support, respite services, and financial assistance to family members and community caregivers supporting older persons with cognitive impairment.

6.6 Promote Meaningful Participation

Ensure that older persons, including those living with cognitive impairment whenever possible and appropriate, are meaningfully consulted and involved in decisions affecting their lives, communities, and public policies.

6.7 Strengthen Community-Based Organizations

Recognize and support community-based organizations that work directly with older persons. These organizations play a critical role in identifying vulnerable individuals, documenting human rights violations, promoting inclusion, and delivering community-based responses in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

6.8 Strengthen International Protection

Encourage continued progress towards stronger international standards on the rights of older persons, ensuring that the specific rights and needs of older persons living with cognitive impairment are fully reflected in international human rights instruments and implementation mechanisms.

7. Conclusion

ELDERS ASSISTANCE ASBL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the United Nations Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons.

Our experience in conflict-affected South Kivu demonstrates that older persons living with cognitive impairment face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, exclusion, neglect, and violence. These challenges are further intensified by armed conflict, forced displacement, poverty, and limited access to healthcare and social protection.

Despite these difficulties, our community consultations also demonstrate that older persons are resilient, knowledgeable, and active members of their communities. When their voices are heard and their rights are respected, they make valuable contributions to their families and society.

We respectfully call on the international community to strengthen efforts to ensure that older persons living with cognitive impairment are fully recognized as rights-holders and are protected through inclusive laws, policies, humanitarian responses, and community-based services.

No older person should be left behind because of age, cognitive impairment, poverty, or conflict. Their dignity, autonomy, participation, and human rights must be respected and protected at all times.

We thank the United Nations Independent Expert for providing this important opportunity to contribute and remain committed to supporting global efforts to advance the human rights of older persons.

Patient BULAMBO
National coordinator