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## **Empowering older adults through age- and eco-friendly principles: the AFECO project and the Portuguese experience**

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Europe's demography has significantly changed in the last decade with older adults (defined here as those aged 65 years or more) in the EU-27, rising from 90.5 million at the start of 2019 to reach 129.8 million by 2050. The ageing population is driving significant transformations in culture, institutions, and communities.

National and European policies give special attention to the empowerment and participation of older people in all aspects of social and economic life, by promoting active ageing and ageing in place strategies [1]. Ageing in place refers to the preference, and the ability, of older adults to remain in their homes for as long as possible, even as they face increasing frailty and complex

needs. This approach fosters social connections through relationships with family and friends [2, 3], contributing to feelings of comfort and security [4].

Over time, the concept has expanded to include not just the home itself but also the surrounding environment and community. The concept has been recognised also by the World Health Organization (WHO), which identifies local environments as key entry points for promoting healthy, active, and well-supported ageing [5].

Adhering to age-friendly principles within the frameworks of active ageing and ageing in place requires a commitment to environmental sensitivity and protection, as environmental responsibility is one of the most pressing societal challenges of our time.

In this context, the AFECO project [6] is dedicated to empowering older adults towards the implementation of affordable, eco-friendly, and age-friendly solutions for ageing in place. This innovative Erasmus+ funded project uniquely combines age-friendly and eco-friendly learning principles, equipping older adults with the knowledge and skills to apply these solutions independently.

The main objective of AFECO is to develop a well-structured and open e-learning platform aiming to raise awareness and educate older people, (in)formal caregivers and social workers regarding: i) the application of age-friendly principles (indoor and outdoor) as a valuable tool for active ageing and ageing in place; and ii) the cultural and behavioural shift needed for the promotion of age-friendly environment principles through their interaction with environmentally friendly principles.

AFECO's primary target group consists of older adults who live independently and may be healthy and active, as well as those with chronic conditions or significant impairments. Informal caregivers (neighbours, children, partners, friends) and formal social and healthcare workers are targeted as well.

The development of the educational content and curriculum for the platform was carried out in two phases, across all partner countries.

The first phase involved a consultation process with all target groups, focusing on understanding older adults' learning preferences, needs, and their knowledge of eco- and age-friendly solutions. The second phase focused on co-creation with older adults, gathering their feedback and suggestions on the AFECO curriculum.

In the first phase, in Portugal, we conducted interviews with 20 older adults, with 17 participants aged 65-74 and 3 participants aged 75-84. Our research also involved conducting focus groups and interviews with caregivers and experts, including nursing home workers (1 technical director, 3 caregivers, 2 nurses, and 1 psychologist/sociocultural animator), a pharmacy professor at the University and a researcher on active ageing, a doctoral student in social ecology, a family doctor in a family health unit.

The interview findings highlighted the need to clearly define these principles and indicated that training for older adults should be tailored to address different knowledge levels, for instance including practical examples applicable to daily life, alongside interactive elements to enhance engagement and learning.

In the second phase, older adults played a key role in the co-creation of the AFECO learning curriculum. Specifically, SHINE organised a meeting with a small group of older adults, who were invited to comment and provide feedback and suggestions on one of the learning units of the curriculum.

Participants were asked to comment on the curriculum's content, style, visual and overall learning experience. The participants demonstrated a high level of engagement and involvement throughout the session, consistently eager to respond to questions, share their opinions, and connect the content to their daily experiences. Their key feedback emphasised the importance of incorporating images to clarify and develop certain concepts. They also stressed the need to avoid content overlap, which was essential for effectively structuring the learning units on the platform.

The inputs from this co-creation session have been integrated into the curriculum structure, which will be delivered through an interactive e-learning platform that is open and easily accessible to all older adults, enabling them to effectively apply the knowledge and practices learned.

At the end of the project, a validation handbook will be published that will encompass the final versions of the education and training contents and of the methodology that should be followed for the most successful delivery of the content to new learners and interested stakeholders.

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