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The Reference Framework to implement Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments

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Aim

The concept of Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments (SHAFE)[1] was born in Portugal and The Netherlands in 2017 as a Thematic Network approved by the European Commission[2]

with the support of 160 European organisations and networks. A decade earlier, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a guide on the concept of age-friendly cities and communities[3] to meet the challenges of ageing and urbanisation. The purpose of the Guide was to engage cities and communities to become more age-friendly, enabling older people to participate better and be engaged. However, the WHO concept was developed before the massive digital transformation (also known as "the mobile era"[4]) took place and does not fully address the challenges and opportunities this shift presents. Moreover, it was recognised that ageing starts much earlier than at the age of 60. Even though there is a lack of consensus among scientists on what biological ageing is[5], the SHAFE initiators defend a lifelong approach to the development of human beings, their health and well-being.

As a consequence of the Thematic Network development, the SHAFE Foundation was launched in 2024 with the following premises: 1) combine the social, physical and digital environments of people to achieve outcomes such as independent living, social participation, health and well-being and sustainable environments, 2) build and maintain local or regional ecosystems of multiple stakeholders to achieve sustainable cooperation and results, 3) empower citizens of all ages with lifelong learning opportunities to foster healthy lifestyles, social participation and digital inclusion and 4) focus on collaboration and implementation to actually achieve smart healthy age-friendly environments for all.

Launching a concept is one thing, but implementing it represents a wider challenge. This paper aims to share the process of developing a reference framework with appropriate tools to support stakeholders in implementing SHAFE successfully.

Theoretical framework

Smart Healthy Age-Friendly Environments (SHAFE) support social inclusion, well-being and healthy longevity of citizens of all ages and in every condition or background. The concept emphasises integrated, person-centred care and well-being pathways that are affordable and accessible, enhancing health and well-being across diverse populations. Digital technologies support, among others, the decision-making of stakeholders, citizens' health and well-being, and the workforce's productivity. Urban planning, housing and social policies aim to achieve inclusive and accessible communities responsive to their needs. The ultimate goal is to create sustainable, eco-friendly environments that support health, while preserving resources for future generations.

Methods

Over the past five years, the SHAFE Foundation crafted a fictional Garcia family, based on extensive co-creation with citizens to model smart, sustainable and inclusive environments. Garcia is the most common surname in Europe[6], and the eight family members are designed as so-called personas[7], representing the diverse European population currently living in different European homes or neighbourhoods. To support the Garcia family in achieving health, well-being, and social and digital inclusion, SHAFE identified key stakeholder groups, including policymakers, health and care professionals, developers, scientists, and academia, to drive SHAFE implementation.

SHAFE has been further developed in the context of European projects and focused on showcasing to stakeholders the possibilities of investing in, combining, and facilitating inclusive and sustainable communities. One of the most relevant ones was the COST Action NET4Age-Friendly[8], implemented between 2020 and 2024, led by some of the authors of this contribution, and ended with a network of almost 800 researchers from 50 countries with multidisciplinary backgrounds and positions.

The NET4Age-Friendly COST Action was organised in five working groups (WG): WG1 User-centred inclusive design of age-friendly environments and communities, WG2 Integrated health and well-being pathways, WG3 Digital solutions and large-scale sustainable implementation, WG4 SHAFE impact and sustainability and WG5 Reference Framework. The working group members jointly worked on identifying the state of the art in research and society on each topic. The COST instruments of Short-term Scientific Missions and Virtual Mobility were used to enable researchers to perform in-depth analysis and desk research on the topics [9].

SHAFE was also the core of a Coordination and Support Action named SIRENE, co-funded by the European Union under the Horizon Europe Programme[10] with six official partners.

The SIRENE project focused on three pillars: to create a social innovation framework to increase investment in eco-friendly and inclusive environments, to nurture a co-creation network of experts and local ecosystems for SHAFE implementation across Europe and to develop a sustainability strategy that enables the potential of responsive technologies to support inclusive, eco-friendly and independent living. The outcomes of SIRENE were developed and officially approved in co-creation with 57 ICT, health, social science and urban planning experts from 27 EU countries and beyond.

Results

One of the final deliverables of NET4Age-Friendly is the Reference Framework (currently under publication), which is comprised of topics such as social innovation, policy uptake and implementation, exploitation and business models, and digital transition. The Framework also links to five learning modules developed in the Action[11], good practices, guidelines and standards to facilitate implementation.

The SIRENE project developed a social innovation framework consisting of five building blocks: capacity building, sustainability strategy, ecosystem development and maintenance, a blueprint of good practices and a manual on social innovation [10].

Both frameworks focus on successfully combining social, physical and digital environments for citizens and other stakeholders and support the implementation of SHAFE by providing the appropriate tools.

Relevance in theory and practice

The frameworks were developed in close collaboration with all relevant stakeholders across local and regional ecosystems. Collaborating with diverse, multidisciplinary stakeholders is essential to creating impactful frameworks that address future needs.

The future works based on these two outcomes concern their practical implementation, monitoring and assessment, with the possibility of the materials being improved or enriched by including potential feedback received and inclusion of new areas considered relevant.

Resources

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