

Hungarian and European Conscious Ageing Network: Cooperation between Municipalities, Municipality Associations, NGOs and business to promote Active and Conscious Ageing in Hungary and Europe

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As the European population is ageing, local communities are increasingly confronted with complex, interconnected challenges. Demographic change intersects with economic uncertainty, social fragmentation, health inequalities, labour market restructuring and the broader polycrisis affecting Europe. In this context, no single sector possesses sufficient resources, legitimacy or expertise to respond effectively on its own. A new, ecosystem-based approach is required — one that connects municipalities, civil society, business actors, academia and citizens in shared responsibility for active and conscious ageing.

The Hungarian and European Conscious Ageing Network represents such an emerging model of intersectoral and intergenerational cooperation. In Hungary, the initiative is coordinated by the Hekate Conscious Ageing Foundation in collaboration with the Janoshida Municipality, the TÖÖSZ (National Association of Local Governments), the health-focused company Haleon, and a growing circle of municipalities, SMEs, community organisations, researchers and media actors. At the European level, the network builds partnerships with municipalities and professional organisations committed to strengthening community resilience and age-friendly regional development.

The central concept underpinning the initiative is the development of a “social ecosystem” that supports (self)care infrastructure and processes across Hungary and beyond. Rather than focusing exclusively on elderly care services, the ecosystem approach recognises ageing as a lifelong process embedded in families, neighbourhoods, workplaces and local economies. It promotes prevention, health literacy, digital inclusion, intergenerational solidarity, volunteering, and local innovation. Conscious ageing is understood not only as an individual attitude but as a collective capacity shaped by policy environments, institutional frameworks and cultural narratives.

Municipalities play a key role as place-based coordinators. They are closest to citizens' everyday realities and can integrate social, health, cultural and economic dimensions at local level. Municipality associations such as TÖÖSZ provide knowledge-sharing platforms and advocacy channels towards national and European decision-makers. Civil society organisations contribute trust, grassroots experience and flexible service models. SMEs and larger companies bring innovation capacity, resources and workplace-based ageing strategies. Academia supports evidence generation and impact assessment, while media actors contribute to reframing ageing from a deficit-based narrative towards one of contribution, dignity and agency.

A distinctive feature of the network is its emphasis on intergenerational cooperation. Programmes connect schools, youth groups and older citizens in joint community projects, mentoring schemes and local development initiatives. This approach not only reduces loneliness and age-based stereotypes but also strengthens social cohesion and community resilience. Ageing thus becomes a shared societal issue rather than a segregated policy field.

International cooperation further enhances learning and policy coherence. Through European partnerships and EU-funded frameworks, Hungarian actors exchange good practices on age-friendly urban planning, community health promotion, digital tools for older adults and participatory governance. European-level dialogue enables local innovations to inform policy recommendations aligned with EU priorities on social inclusion, the care economy, and sustainable regional development. At the same time, the network seeks to ensure that grassroots knowledge informs higher-level strategies, creating a feedback loop between practice and policy.

The presentation will outline the theoretical foundations of the social ecosystem approach, present pilot experiences from Hungarian municipalities, and reflect on the governance mechanisms that enable cross-sectoral collaboration. It will analyse enabling factors (shared vision, trust-building, long-term partnerships, flexible funding models) as well as barriers (fragmented competencies, short-term project logic, resource constraints). Particular attention will be given to how municipalities can act as conveners of multi-actor cooperation without overextending their limited capacities.

The way ahead lies in bringing grassroots knowledge and expertise together with policy-level approaches at the same table. By fostering structured dialogue between local practitioners, business leaders and decision-makers, the Hungarian and European Conscious Ageing Network aims to co-create effective, evidence-informed policies and scalable practices. In doing so, it

contributes to a more resilient, caring and age-inclusive Europe — one in which conscious ageing is not merely an individual aspiration but a shared societal project grounded in cooperation, solidarity and innovation.