



Health Reform Monitor

The growing role of seniors councils in health policy-making for older people in Poland[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Seniors Councils are advisory and consultative bodies that support local political decision-making to assure that the views of older people are taken into account in the decision-making process. Senior Councils are particularly relevant with regard to social policies and health policies. Seniors councils have appeared since the 1970s in Europe and since the early 2000s in Poland. The number of Seniors Councils in Poland has grown in recent years thanks to favorable legislative changes in 2013 and 2015. Since 2015, the local executive administration is obliged to establish a Seniors Council if there is local demand for such a council. The influence of senior councils is likely to grow over the coming years, given the ageing of the population and the related increasing importance of older citizens in the electorate, especially for local political leaders. Seniors Councils can support better informed local decision-making by helping to identify local needs and contributing to a better allocation of scarce resources. They may also help to draw more resources to health promotion and primary prevention for older people in an environment of financial constraints and a health care system that traditionally prioritizes curative care.

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1. Introduction

Demographic changes occurring in Poland and other countries in Europe require that health policy goals comprise not only securing access to medical services but also increasing prevention, health promotion and social inclusion of older people. In Poland, despite the strengthening of public health institutions over the last few decades, sustainable policy perspective in the area of public health is still lacking. The traditionally higher priority attached to curative care is one of the major reasons for the shortcomings of public health policy and the insufficient resources for health promotion and primary prevention in general, and health promotion for older people specifically [1]. Given the above as well as financial limitations, the need is emerging to design innovative solutions in this area. Seniors Councils in Poland are an example of such a solution. They are advisory and consultative bodies that support local

decision-making in the field of policies concerning older people. As such they can contribute to planning and implementation of local health policies. Their importance is likely to grow given the increasing share of older people in the population and thus the growing importance of older citizens in the electorate, especially for local political leaders.

Seniors Councils can also be found in other countries in Europe and beyond, including Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, the USA, and Canada [2,4]. They have been established since 1970s and become especially popular in the last decade. They operate according to different principles - both in terms of composition, geographical reach (local or national), or types of activities [3]. However all of them support the interests of older people in national or local government policies, including in the area of health. An important aspect of their activities is cooperation with other organizations, such as NGOs, that work towards promoting or improving the health of seniors [4]. In Finland, over 90% of people over 65 live in communities in which senior councils operate [2]. In Germany, local senior councils have been in operation since the 1970s and there are currently around 1200 of them across the country. Their main tasks are to mediate between seniors and political

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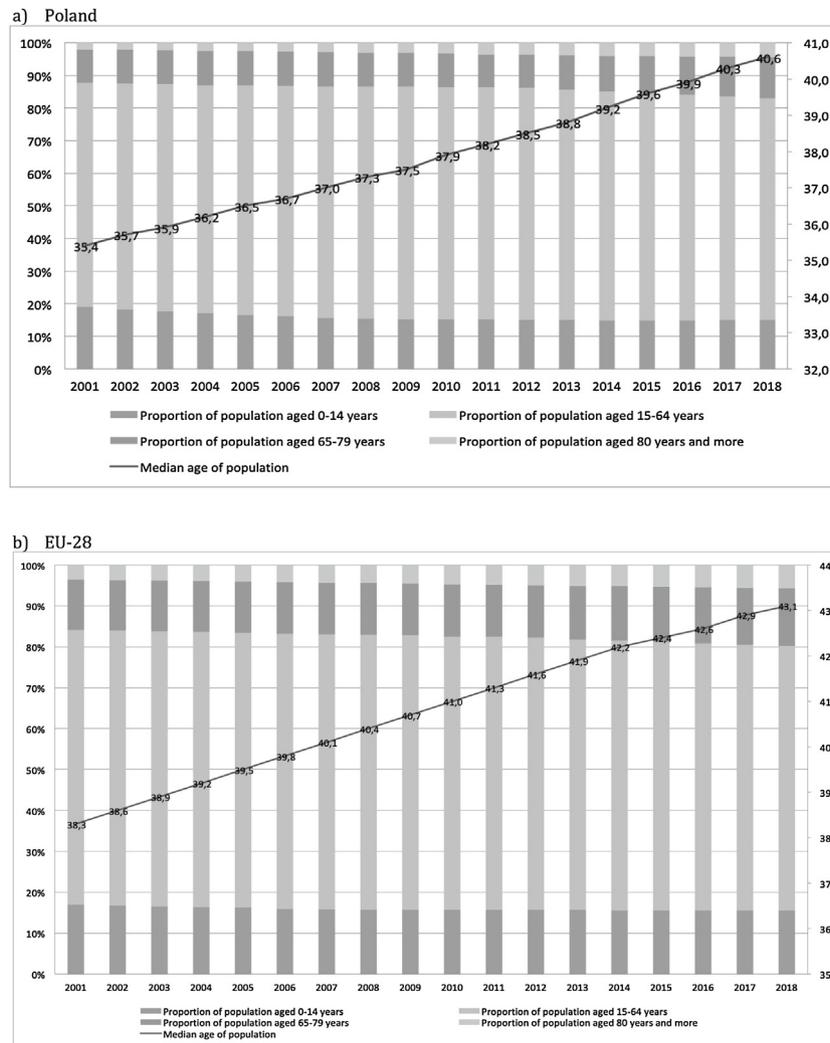


Fig. 1. Population breakdown by age group in Poland and EU-28, 2000–2018.

Source: Based on [2].

decision makers and to give opinions on projects that affect older people [5].

In this article, we describe the emergence and roles of Seniors Councils in Poland. Section 2 presents the contextual background; Section 3 describes the legislative framework within which Seniors Councils operate; Section 4 looks at how Seniors Councils have been established, including their key stakeholder groups; and Section 5 looks at the roles they currently play. Finally, Section 6 debates what roles they may play in future.

2. Reform context

2.1. Demographic changes

Poland is still a relatively young European country, with 11.9% of the population aged 65–79 and 4.1% of the population aged 80+ in 2016 (Fig. 1a). These shares are lower than the respective averages for EU-28 members (13.8% and 5.4%) (Fig. 1b). Analysis of the population breakdown by age over the past years reveals that the aging process in Poland is delayed by several years compared to some other EU member states. For example, the average age of the EU-28 population exceeded the 40-year-old threshold in 2007, while in Poland this figure was reached only in 2016. Similarly, the share of working age population (15–64) in the total population has been

decreasing in the EU-28 since 2002, while in Poland such decline started only in 2010. Further, in EU-28, the share of population aged 65+ exceeded the share of population aged 0–14 in 2005 whereas this only took place in 2015 in Poland.

According to long-term demographic projections, Poland will experience substantially deeper demographic changes compared to EU-28 in the next few decades. The average population age in Poland is likely to exceed 50 years of age between 2040 and 2050, whereas in the same period the EU-28 average will not exceed 47 years of age [6]. Due to the increase in life expectancy and the low fertility rate, the share of people aged 65+ in Poland is foreseen to increase from 16% in 2016 to 33.4% in 2060 (29% in EU-28) (Fig. 2a). At the same time, the proportion of the oldest old (80+) will triple in Poland, reaching 12.6% of the total population in 2060 (increase by a factor of 2.2 in EU-28, to 12.1% of total population). This demographic trend will result in an increase in the old age dependency ratio from 23 in 2016 to 65 in 2060 in Poland, compared to 52 in EU-28.

In many EU countries, the retirement age has been raised, which naturally influences the priorities of national policies in the field of institutional determinants of health care for the older people in the workplace conditions. It should be noted, however, that in 2017 the Polish government lowered the retirement age for men to 65 years old and for women to 60 years old.

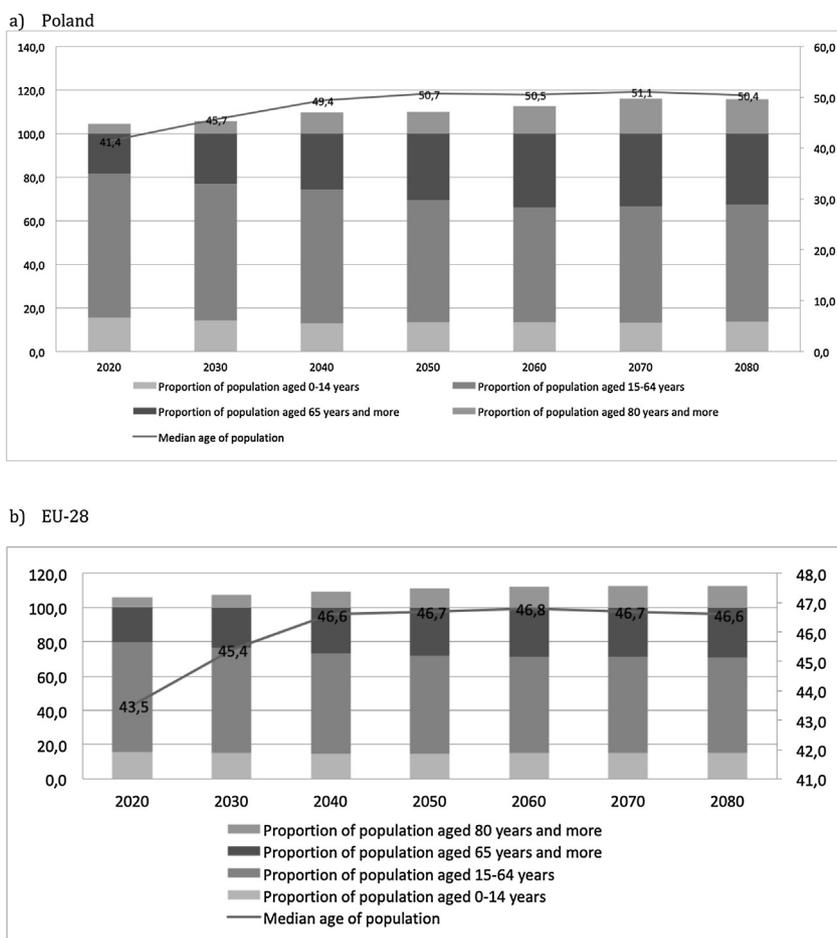


Fig. 2. Population projections by age groups in Poland and EU-28.2020–2080.

Source: Based on [2]

2.2. Public health policy for older people in Poland

National regulations set the direction of health policy, including public health policy for older people. Public health activities for seniors are organised and implemented primarily by institutions within the health sector [7]. They include epidemiological programmes targeted at prevention of specific diseases (e.g. Programme for early prevention of genitourinary cancers among men aged 45+) [8]. Health promotion programmes are mainly implemented in primary health care institutions. However, there is limited interest in public health activities targeted at seniors among primary health care providers (it is commonly assumed that older generations are not a good target for health promotion as it is too late to change their lifestyle). Health sector's engagement in the area of public health increased since 2015, when following the amendment of the Law on Health Care Services Financed from Public Sources (Journal of Laws, 2004, No. 210, item 2135) the National Health Fund (NHF) was given the right to elaborate, implement and finance services which serve the whole population or a particular group of beneficiaries and are not strictly medical/therapeutic. An example of such a service is the NHF's financing of flu vaccinations for people over 65.

Territorial self-governments play a key role in providing public health interventions for older people in Poland [1]. Since 1999, Polish territorial self-government has been divided into three levels: 16 regions (voivodships), 380 counties (powiat) and 2478 municipalities (gmina). Self-governments at each level perform public tasks that are not exclusively reserved for public authorities at

higher levels. In the area of health care, territorial self-governments are mainly responsible for provision of public health services, including health promotion and prevention, and for tasks related to their function as the owners of public health care units [9]. Both regions and municipalities have Departments of Social and Health Policy within their organizational structures [4]. According to the Law on Health Care Services Financed from Public Sources, territorial self-governments are obliged to plan, implement and evaluate health programmes addressing diagnosed local health needs.

Several forms of self-governmental activity concern public health policy for older people, including the development and implementation of community health promotion and prevention programmes (e.g. increasing public awareness in the field of 'healthy ageing', promotion of healthy lifestyles), supporting implementation of screening programmes, and promoting early diagnosis. Local activities also include supporting the work of NGOs, for example, in the area of continuing education for older people (Universities of the Third Age). A few self-governments (especially larger cities) are very active in the field of health promotion for older people and run own health promotion programmes (for example, the "Golden Autumn" programme of the Opolskie Voivodship, "SENIOR CAPITAL" and "Quality Ageing in an Urban Environment" of the Municipality of Sopot, PASIOS (Programme for social activity and integration of older people) and "The Golden Age" of the Municipality of Krakow). In many cases the regional and local governments are also obliged to implement national programmes [10].

Each level of territorial self-government is independent – it has its own organisational units and responsibilities. Territorial self-governments are run by political parties and pursue issues of importance on their own territory. As a result of the above, coordination of activities, including in the area of health promotion, and an effective use of financial resources (coming from different budgets) difficult [4]. This is despite the existence of a few very active and supportive self-government associations oriented at improving cooperation: the Federation of Polish Municipalities (Związek Miast Polskich), the Association of Polish Counties (Związek Powiatów Polskich) and the Association of Polish Healthy Cities (Stowarzyszenie Zdrowych Miast Polskich).

3. Reform content

Seniors Councils have been established since early 2000s, following the model of Youth Councils that had existed since 1990 and that were legally formalized in 2001. Seniors Councils gained a legal basis for their existence in 2013, when the amendment of the Act on Municipal Self-government (Journal of Laws 2013 item 1318) gave municipalities the right (and encouraged them) to set up such councils within a wider goal of promoting solidarity between generations and creating conditions for civic participation (though it has to be underlined that Seniors Councils are not part of the municipal self-governments). In a way, Seniors Councils constitute a counterbalance to the municipal Youth Councils, reflecting the demographic changes occurring in the population. According to Article 5c of the 2013 amendment, a Seniors Council is an initiative-taking body, which can also act in a consultative and advisory capacity. It is composed of representatives of older citizens, as well as representatives of local entities working for the benefit of older people, in particular NGOs and entities operating the Universities of the Third Age. The main goal of Seniors Councils is to serve older persons by representing their interests within the municipality – they offer older citizens a platform to represent their interests and needs and influence local decision making – and by strengthening their integration as a group and their participation in local activities.

Pursuant to the 2013 amendment, the appointment of the Seniors Council requires that the new body has a statute. Statutes determine how members of the Councils are elected and the rules of Councils' operation. Municipalities enjoy much leeway in regulating Seniors Councils, allowing the Councils to tailor their activities to local needs and capacity. Regulations are usually rather vaguely worded, which may mean more freedom in operation but it may also weaken the position of the Councils – it may be difficult to deduce what activities they may pursue and what rights they are entitled to.

The position of the Council is further weakened by the lack of own budgets. This means that any activity they wish to pursue is conditioned on obtaining financing from the local self-government. The few Councils who do have their own budgets are not allowed to dispose of them freely, since they do not have a legal personality.

4. Reform implementation

The process of setting up of Seniors Councils varies among the municipalities. It is usually initiated by the municipal mayor, while the formal decision to set up the Seniors Council is made by the municipal council through a resolution.

In order to perform their tasks effectively, Seniors Councils should identify their local stakeholders. Seniors Councils are of importance to a number of local actors (Fig. 3). Apart from older citizens, these actors include: Universities of the Third Age (NGO sector), municipal councils, municipal social welfare centers and

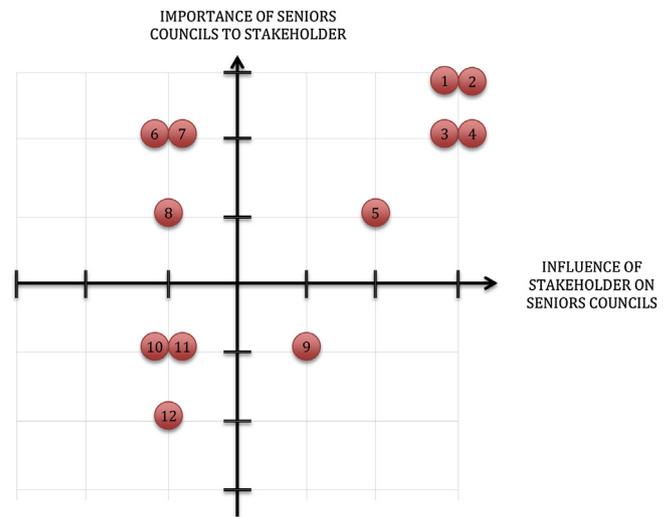


Fig. 3. Position and influence of key stakeholders of Seniors Councils.

Notes: 1 – senior citizens; 2 – Universities of the Third Age; 3 – municipal councils; 4 – municipal social welfare centers; 5 – municipal centers of culture; 6 – NGOs; 7 – volunteers; 8 – police; 9 – municipal mayors; 10 – local businesses; 11 – schools and other educational institutions; 12 – employees of municipal office / city halls providing administrative support to Seniors Councils.

Source: Authors.

municipal centers of culture. The above stakeholders have the most influence on the functioning of Seniors Councils, e.g. Universities of the Third Age may influence Seniors Councils through joint educational projects. For municipal councils, Seniors Councils are important partners as senior citizens represent an important electoral base. Municipal councils have considerable influence on Senior Councils as they appoint them and approve their statutes (see above). They provide administration to the Seniors Councils; often provide premises and resources for implementing Council's activities. They also make decisions concerning any proposals related to older people living in the municipality.

Municipal social welfare centers and municipal centers of culture have interests in an effective functioning of the Seniors Councils because they cater, to some extent, to the same clientele and their activities may be complementary.

Seniors Councils are also of importance to the NGOs and volunteers who focus their activities on older people (e.g. Seniors Councils are a source of information on the needs of older populations for the NGOs and the voluntary sector). Due to limited contact, their influence on the Seniors Councils is relatively low. Other actors may also have some interest in an effective functioning of Seniors Councils. These include the police (e.g. Seniors Councils may provide reliable information for the local risk maps), municipal mayors (e.g. Seniors Councils may help create more effective solutions to local problems and help attract support from the senior electorate), local businesses (older people constitute an important and growing customer base), educational institutions (possibility of establishing cooperation with Seniors Councils in the field of education tailored at older people). These actors may influence the functioning of Seniors Councils through informal cooperation.

5. Outcomes

According to a 2014 report [11], there were about 46 Seniors Council before the amendment of the Act on Municipal Self-governments came into force. In 2012–14, the number of Seniors Councils increased significantly. This is most likely related to national and European events drawing attention to older people, such as the National Congress of the Universities of the Third Age

Table 1
Examples of activities performed by Seniors Councils.

Area	Examples of activities
Active senior citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running information campaigns promoting active senior citizenship • Leading and supporting activities aimed at the activation of the senior citizens • Setting up databases containing information on organizations working for seniors and their offer • Consulting the curricula of training programs promoting the education of social workers specializing in activating senior communities • Promoting the active involvement of senior communities among different generation groups and supporting intergenerational volunteer service • Employing the potential of senior citizens (their professional experience), e.g. for the creation of regional routes of cultural heritage
Health and social services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying in favor of increased numbers of geriatricians obtained through higher limits in specialist medical training • Support for the establishment of local social services centers, especially such that combine social and health care services • Creating conditions for joint initiatives of social and medical services sectors • Promotional programs for preventive health care for senior citizens (e.g. community nurses educating the elderly in their homes) • The <i>Active Municipality Competition</i> – promoting initiatives activating residents • Taking actions promoting healthy life style • Mobile health care outlets – providing health care services and preventive health care at a place of residence
Silver economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The growth of social economy entities working towards fulfilling the needs of senior citizens • Diagnosing needs and providing recommendations, also for businesses, in the context of creating and identifying the market for goods and services addressed to senior citizens
Public policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The inclusion of old age related issues in the region's strategic documents • Launching media campaigns on old age and creating the positive image of old age and its problems • The promotion of the idea of setting up teacher development centers and/or teaching methodology centers and using their structures to incorporate the issues related to old age as part of the human life cycle into school education • Taking initiatives to increase the safety of older people, including the training of competent services in the area of senior abuse prevention

Source: Authors based on interviews with representatives of Seniors Councils.

(2012) and the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between generations (2012) and the introduction of article 5c to the on Municipal Self-governments at the end of 2013. In 2014, there were about 76 Seniors Councils, with membership ranging from 5 to over 30 members (usually older people).

Since 2015, the role of councils acting in public benefit has been strengthened and the number of Senior Councils increased further (from 1 in 2006 to 220 in 2016) [11]. While previously the local executive administration had the right to establish a Seniors Council, the amendment of the Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit Activity and Voluntary Work (Journal of Laws 2015 item 1339) made it their obligation to establish one if there is local demand for such a council.

Establishment of Seniors Councils is often initiated by a local leader who was already actively involved in supporting the community of older people (e.g. involved in the local University of the Third Age or in an organization targeted at older people) or by local self-governments. Irrespective of how they are established, Seniors Councils usually aim to forge a strong relationship with the local self-government, in particular with the municipal council, in order to maximize its influence on local decision making.

Along with the formal appointment of the Seniors Council, the municipal mayor (or city mayor) indicates the department of the local self-government that will provide administrative support to the Seniors Council. This seemingly purely organizational decision has significant bearing on the functioning of Seniors Councils (it determines the main areas of activities) and their position vis-à-vis the local self-government. Most often administrative support is performed by departments dealing with educational, health or social affairs or, less often, by a designated institution (e.g. a local center supporting NGOs).

Seniors Councils operate in the following areas, with all activities specifically aimed at older people: housing; prevention and health promotion; sports, recreation, leisure, education and culture, working conditions [12]; prevention and reduction of the marginalization of seniors, prevention of occupational risks of senior workers; supporting active lifestyles, overcoming stereotypes about older people and old age. The range of activities

performed by Seniors Councils (Table 1) confirms the important role that Councils play in the local communities, including by shaping local health policies.

6. Conclusions

Demographic and epidemiological changes observed in Poland and other EU countries and the prolongation of life expectancy affect the nature of the societal needs that can and should be fulfilled as part of social policy and, in particular, health policy. Social services are the cornerstone of the European social model and their effective delivery is one of the determinants of social order and economic and territorial cohesion in the European Union [13–18]. They are also instrumental in achieving the goals of the Lisbon Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy. Limited public funding forces public actors to look for solutions that will allow do more for less [19]. Seniors Councils in Poland appear to be one of such solutions in that they can use local resources to identify local needs and contribute to a better allocation of scarce resources. While their numbers remain relatively low, they have been increasing since 2012 and the recent (2015) legislative changes have given their number an additional boost.

The main policy document in Poland in the area of public policy targeted at seniors, the Guidelines for Long-term Senior Policy for 2014–2020 [20], identifies five key areas of importance: (1) health and autonomy, (2) professional activity, (3) educational, social and cultural activity, (4) silver economy and (5) intergenerational relations. The implementation of the Guidelines is supported by a number of EU operational programmes (for example, EU Operational Programme 2014–2020 Science, Education and Development), that are aimed at increasing the participation of older people in the society and strengthening their influence on local public policies, including health policy. Seniors Councils appear to be well suited to fulfill these goals. Given their importance to local politicians and the growing share of older people in the population, Seniors' councils may become, in future, one of the most important ways of exchanging knowledge between citizens and decision mak-

ers and an important communication tool for residents, NGOs and public officials.

Their activity is necessarily for growth of living conditions of older people in the local environment through (1) motivations to co-production, (2) ability to delegate power and share responsibility in undertaken actions, (3) inhabitants as a key services users, (4) ability to creating integrating structures, (5) identification and acceptance of risk and (6) trust [21].

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