Dr Michael Hodin, Executive Director of Global Coalition on Aging, will speak at the Chatham House conference Ageing and Health: Policy and Economics in an Era of Longevity, 9-10 February 2015.

In this speaker commentary, Dr Hodin outlines the challenges and opportunities of ageing populations, highlighting themes for consideration at the conference.

As we approach 2020, we will have reached a truly remarkable milestone where for the first time in our history there will be 1 billion of us over 60 and heading rapidly toward more old than young on the planet. Global population aging is one of the seminal megatrends of our time with profound implications for individuals, communities and whole societies.

How we live in an era of longevity – the miracle bequeathed us from 20th century advances in medicine, technology, innovative health solutions and application of information to health outcomes – paradoxically creates several challenges in order for us to transform this welcome longevity from a presumptive burden of too many “old people” to a cheerful and enthusiastic promise for economic growth, value creation and happiness.

The challenges are indeed huge since our circumstances of population aging are not only about living longer into our 80s, 90s and shortly a hundred as a matter of course, but as a consequence of the parallel and stunning low birthrates that have become an apparently permanent feature of modernizing and urbanizing societies across the globe, we are now equally challenged by a different proportion of working age to old age by those now obsolete 20th century standards.

We now see these age-demographic realities across all OECD countries, emerging markets from China to Brazil, Mexico to Turkey, and also in the next two decades in poorer, developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa.

As we consider the relationship of aging and health in this 21st century demographic construction, there are three principal questions:

(a) What public policy and institutional reforms are required to transform those over 60 from the 20th century assumption of dependent and disabled to being understood as central to the 21st century sustainable model for economic growth and valued creation?

(b) What are the 3-5 big shifts required to achieve this new paradigm that fully integrates those over 60 into society’s framework of work, activity, engagement?

(c) What are the principal barriers to the transformation required if globally we are to begin reshaping and reimagining our life course in this era of longevity?

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