

Side Event on Strengthening Partnerships to Address Online Scams
Targeting Older Persons

Panel organised by UNODC Civil Society Unit

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Many thanks for the invitation to speak at this impressive panel.

In my today's contribution, I shall take a specifically human perspective and put the individual – the older person – into the focus of our considerations.

Even though technical and organisational measures are definitely very important to address online scams targeting older persons, they unfortunately are not always available, sufficient or effective.

This is why we have to search for complementary strategies to maximise our efforts to prevent that such criminal attempts can be successful.

To start with, we have urgently to review our attitude towards older persons and reconsider what they really are. We must clearly reject the very common prejudice and judgement that most of them are mainly “old, frail and forgetful”.

In contrast, we should not underestimate the capacities of older persons and acknowledge their real competences – acquired over a long lifespan - in understanding problems and challenges, in reaching sound judgements and in taking adequate decisions.

Recent findings of the scientific community (Research at the University of Dallas, Texas) have clearly proved that the human brain does not lose placidity over the years, but has no ceiling for cognitive performance, even at advanced age, if appropriately stimulated by proactive brain health strategies.

This conclusion should lead us to the understanding that older persons should not simply be passively protected against online scams but that measures have to be taken to enable them to understand the challenges and to be prepared to actively defend themselves against fraud.

Because if technical protection measures are insufficient or ineffective, the individual is the real final gatekeeper who must be able to properly assess the danger and be capable to act by creating a personal blocking firewall.

Now, how can older persons be well prepared, advised and supported so that they can successfully cope with tentatives of online scams and other forms of attempts of fraud through modern communication tools?

There are many good measures to help them to detect such attempts and we know about effective practical techniques for their protection. Just to mention some 10 examples:

- 1) The first step is to promote self-confidence of older persons that they believe "Yes, I can defend myself"
- 2) It is of great value to provide older persons with simple tables listing the most alarming signs and patterns of potentially dangerous communications
- 3) Most helpful is clear advice on how to judge on the validity or possible dangers of online messages and telephone contacts
- 4) Very useful is also to suggest how to strongly react if a message or a contact is suspicious or threatening
- 5) A good measure is to agree with family members and close friends on a word or short sentence of mutual identification
- 6) It is absolutely indispensable to find an easily accessible person of confidence to exchange with before taking any action
- 7) Such a person of confidence and exchange is also important to overcome personal shame in case of victimisation by a successful fraud
- 8) It is very helpful to simulate situations of online scam or telephone fraud within the family and discuss appropriate reactions
- 9) In institutions, small discussion groups of peers can be very useful to promote older persons self-confidence and train self-determination
- 10) The creation of special interactive websites for older persons with examples of potentially dangerous situations, their assessment and how to best react to them is indispensable

These are just a few advices and measures of how to enable older persons to defend and protect themselves against online scams and frauds by communication systems.

These proposed practical measures must necessarily be discussed in depth and enlarged in focus groups composed by older persons, psychologists, care professionals and similar experts aiming at the production - through a co-creation process – of an easy to understand and to implement “User Manual”.

Just a few concluding remarks:

- 1) We have to recognise that we cannot “save” all older persons from fraud – but at least we can help many to protect themselves.
- 2) There are just too many factors that facilitate online scams: economic and psychological factors, personal greed and fear, low self-confidence, the wish to help, loneliness, shame.
- 3) Action against online scam must always start at the level of the target person and his/her environment.
- 4) The help of grassroot social structures must be involved, valued and strengthened.
- 5) Above all, older persons themselves must be empowered and enabled to cope adequately with scam attacks.

And finally, I would like to draw the attention of all those concerned with the issue of online scams targeting older persons to realise a significant anthropological problem, and this is “loneliness in advanced age”, leading to growing “relational poverty”.

Also, and even in particular, older persons need urgently face-to-face relationships and communication with other human beings to be able to better understand the situation they are living in and to cope with the rapid changes in the modern world. They need attention and help so that they will not become marginalised or even excluded from society.

Unfortunately, inter-generational relations cannot really solve the problem. Just a practical example: The hope of parents for help from their children in IT matters when they cannot understand or successfully cope with hardware and software matters.

- Either frequent demands will lead to an overstress of the relationship between children and parents, because children may have different priorities and obligations,
- or parents may completely withdraw from asking their children for support because they are embarrassed and ashamed by their incapacity to handle things themselves.

Thus, it is most important to understand the emotional factors and the complexity determining the living situation of older persons before we design strategies and formulate recommendations.

Thank you very much for your kind attention!

Dirk Jarré

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