

life quality  
of senior citizens



in relation to  
mobility conditions

## Research Summary N° 3

Focus-Group interviews and  
in-depth interviews with  
senior citizens and experts

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## The project

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**SIZE** – "Life quality of senior citizens in relation to mobility conditions" (project number QLK6-CT-2002-02399) is a project in the framework of the specific research and technological development programme "Quality of life and management of living resources", key action 6 "The ageing population and disabilities" in EU's Fifth Framework Programme.

European policy regarding the elderly aims at maintaining their mobility. This is a central element of their integration in society. Senior citizens want to stay autonomous and independent as far as possible. Without the possibility to maintain mobility, senior citizens cannot lead an independent life, with many other problems such as isolation and health problems as a consequence.

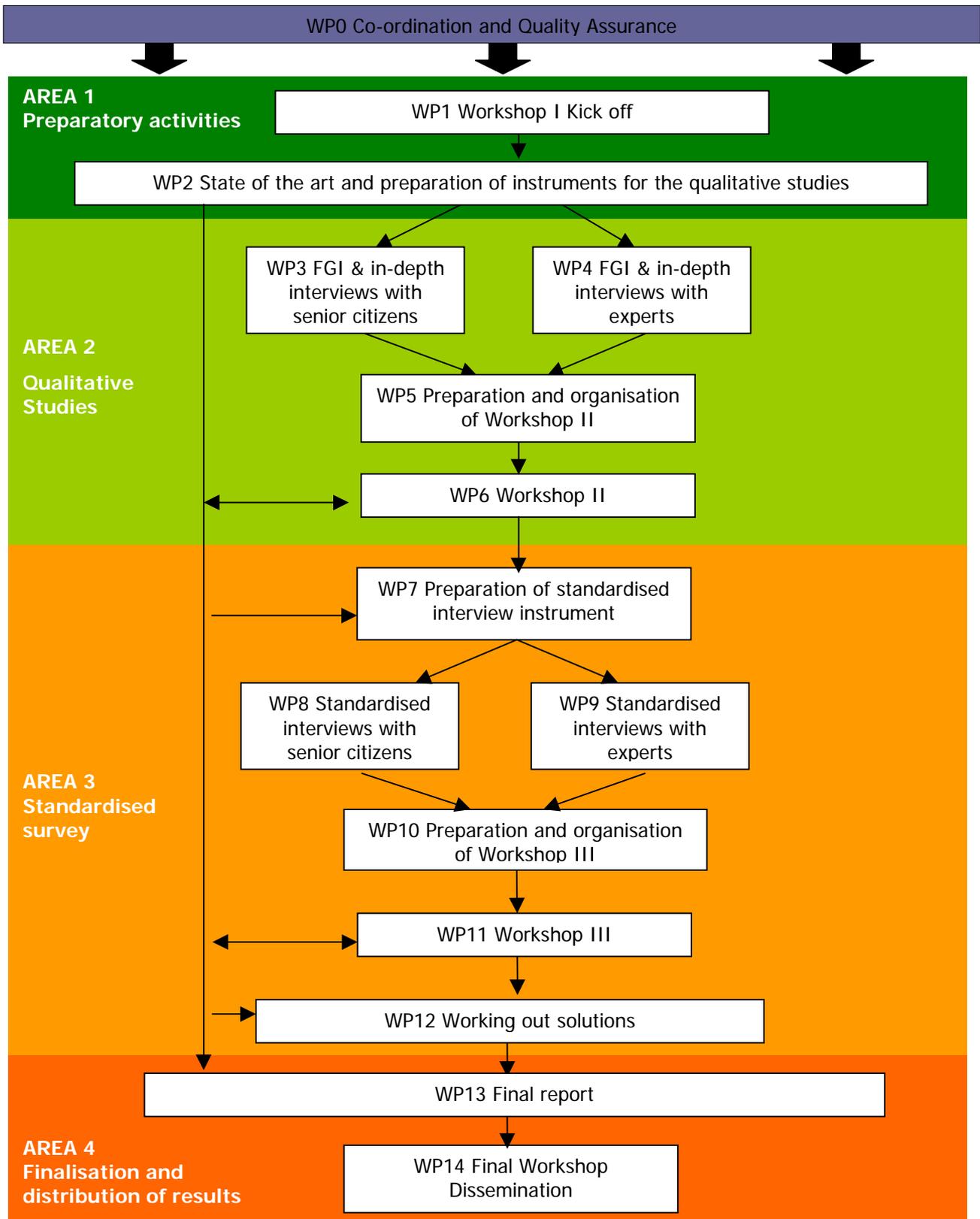
The project **SIZE** has a life-span of 3 years and is divided into 4 research areas: State-of-the-art & preparatory activities, qualitative studies, standardised survey and finalisation & distribution of results.

The general objectives of **SIZE** are:

- To explain and describe the present mobility and transport situation, the problems, needs and wishes of different groups of senior citizens from their own perspective compared with experts' points of view ("experts" being sociologists, psychologists, traffic experts, experts on gerontology, politicians, policy makers, experts of other related EU projects, etc.);
- To motivate action by the authorities and other relevant groups in society who are, or feel, responsible in this area, by making discrepancies in problem identification transparent;
- To identify relevant solutions for existing problems and to provide guidance for setting up and implementing policies aimed at "keeping the elderly mobile".

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## Structure of the project SIZE



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## **FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH SENIOR CITIZENS AND EXPERTS**

### **Objectives**

The general objective of Workpackage 3 and Workpackage 4 of the project **SIZE** was the qualitative analysis of the present mobility and transport situation of seniors from the eight European countries that participated in the project.

The main goal was to explain and describe the problems, needs and wishes of different groups of senior citizens from their own perspective compared with experts' points of view, namely:

- 1) What are the basic factors influencing the elderly citizens' mobility conditions in each country today,
- 2) How do senior citizens cope with the present mobility situation,
- 3) What enhances and what limits the mobility of senior citizens in different countries,
- 4) Which measures are necessary to improve the situation,
- 5) What prevents measures that are considered useful from being implemented.

The results of WP3 and WP4 form the base to produce the quantitative, standardised instruments for the next study areas (WP5-WP9), will give ideas for solutions in the future (WP12) and will produce input to the final report (WP13).

### **Methodology**

All research partners (representing eight European countries) followed

the same methodology in order to make the results comparable. Workpackage leaders were responsible for the coordination of the work within the respective work-packages. The WP leaders had to work closely together during this research phase, starting from the building of the general work-plans and time-schedules of interviews with seniors and experts, through the process of interviewing and interpreting all results, up to the final analysis and reporting. The two separate work-plans were coordinated and delivered to all the participating partners, together with the other helping documents and instructions.

The general methodology of interviewing senior citizens (Workpackage 3) and experts (Workpackage 4) was the same, namely: qualitative studies for both groups, seniors and experts, consisted of the Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) and the In-Depth Interviews (IDIs).

The senior citizens participants were selected with intention to create a sample of all categories: seniors from big cities, small towns and from villages; men and women; with various degrees of education, various types of economic activity and habitation, using various types of mobility. In total, 487 seniors from eight countries participated (in each country 25 - 35 in Focus-Groups and 25 - 35 individual interviews).

The expert participants were selected with the intention to cover a wide range: The total sample of 225 ex

perts (25 - 35 persons in each participating country) included researchers, decision makers and practitioners who deal with all aspects of seniors' mobility – urban planners, traffic engineers, psychologists, sociologists, social workers, nurses, etc.

## Main findings

What do you think about older people's mobility conditions today?

The structure of everyday mobility of seniors, as revealed by the study, is similar across the countries. Basic needs in the mobility domain include daily activities (shopping, running errands, health care), walking (for fun, with children, the dog), leisure and religious services. It is important to notice that among other responsibilities, seniors often emphasised their involvement in taking care of other elderly or children. This type of activity is an important source of self-acceptance and also a source of motivation for mobility.

Our study confirmed the existence of the 'old person stereotype', with the corresponding groups of elders avoiding any sort of activity. This might have psychological reasons such as depression, lack of motivation, fears, and loneliness.

The elderly are seen as a heterogeneous group. The "younger" elderly up to 70 years or so usually have fewer problems than those at a higher age, or no problems at all. For all of the elderly citizens, however, and especially for the weaker and disabled among them, the preconditions to be mobile are connected to

aspects of life quality: Fulfilment of basic needs, independence, comfort, social contacts, etc. And all of them want to remain mobile.

Mobility conditions for older adults are considered good in urban areas but they seem to be very poor in rural areas. Nevertheless living in a rural area, despite of a poorer infrastructure, may offer to senior citizens the possibility of a better social control in the positive sense.

How do senior citizens cope with their current conditions?

There is a lack of well-organised public representation of senior citizens. Nevertheless, their mobility problems are to some extent taken care of by various associations for disabled people in public life

Housing and financial conditions sometimes contribute to sharpen isolation problems. There is a common claim both from experts and from elderly citizens that "mobility begins at home". This situation for seniors is complicated by the fact that higher age groups of seniors belong to the economically poorest groups in society.

Members of a group of experts listed different types of coping behaviour of elderly road users:

1. Realising that an "intelligent mix" of different kinds of mobility is possible
2. Pragmatic, more rational than emotional use of transportation means
3. Compensatory behaviour on the individual level (i.e. compensating losses in abilities)

4. Forming new social support systems (for instance in the neighbourhood)
5. Moving from sites with poor infrastructure to cities with better infrastructure (cities)
6. Reduction of "unnecessary" mobility
7. Asking for more transportation systems "on demand"

### What enhances the mobility of senior citizens?

Most of the experts interviewed took primarily up technical aspects, they focused more on technical solutions than on society's attitudes towards the elderly (in opposition to the senior citizens' samples).

While technological and economic improvements depend on the country resources, senior citizens have stated across all the countries in the project that society's awareness and better understanding and respect of older people is a common basis to enhance older people's mobility.

The importance attributed to a free-travel pass in some countries should be noted. Such access allows independence and autonomy at a time when physical deterioration can begin to appear. Its use enhances social support and may reduce health costs considerably.

### What limits the mobility of senior citizens?

There are different types of barriers constituting problems for seniors. Physical barriers can be found everywhere - in the streets, in vehicles of public transport, in public buildings.

Typical destinations for seniors are often not in easily accessible places.

The channels through which information arrives or can be acquired also represent a major problem as revealed by the current study. If seniors are not aware of their rights and opportunities they cannot benefit (e.g., special offers, specific public regulations, etc.).

Moreover, seniors meet barriers in form of excessive bureaucracy, indolence, inflexibility and unwillingness of public employees

Older people that we interviewed also put a strong and unexpected emphasis on social factors of outdoor mobility. For instance, one important factor impeding senior citizens' mobility is fear. The structure of seniors' fears is quite stable. Fear of an accident, fear for one's personal security especially by night, fear of being clamped by the crowd, etc.

A separate class of fears is connected with overcrowded buses, or fear of being pushed around when trying to get on a bus during peak times. Also fear of cyclists is sometimes mentioned.

A hesitant attitude towards novelty and new technologies and devices is also important. Another class of fears is more directly connected to the decreased seniors' stamina and health problems. Fear of falling and injury, but also fear for lack of toilet in public places, or a generalised fear that "something might happen", are in some cases accompanied by a fear of lack of help from observers. Some experts emphasised that seniors' safety in the streets might be negatively affected by unrealistic assessment of their own abilities and ca

pacities, and by tendencies to target unrealistic goals.

Elderly drivers feel that some people are prejudiced against their driving. Other road users, but especially those by car, do not have enough understanding for the elderly, when they are moving and acting more slowly and more cautiously. This causes risks and stress for elderly car drivers; however this holds true for all elderly road users generally, and especially when they walk and cycle.

Car traffic is often too fast for elderly car drivers, but more so for vulnerable road users at higher age, for instance when they want to cross the road.

Along the same lines it is necessary to pay attention to complaints from the elderly about being "mistreated" by other social groups, not only as drivers or pedestrians but also as public transport users and in their dealings with public institutions.

The senior citizens in the interviews partly blamed themselves for their own attitudes of inactivity and rigidity, and for sometimes being too inhibited to solve their mobility problems.

One striking aspect is their negative attitude towards local and state representation. It seems that it would be very difficult to facilitate senior citizens' public activity without changing this negative perception.

### What measures are necessary to improve the situation?

Senior citizens have stated two tendencies:

- 1) Some of them seem to be resigned to accepting existing environmental conditions thinking that these are out of their control.
- 2) At the same time, they stress the importance of educational and self-educational measures that would modify societal attitudes and help the elderly to cope with organisational measures and lobbying.

Experts focus on practical and technical measures but underline that lobbying is the most important area to be considered in the future.

The proposals for improvements of both seniors and experts concern mostly improvement of traffic layout, removing barriers and increasing safety and comfort of pedestrians, cyclist, public transport users and drivers. Changes in physical planning are asked for, and improved social services that would allow less mobile persons to live decorously.

Colonisation of rural areas should be reduced. Seniors often see advantages of a life in the cities. So it seems to be reasonable to build up urban structures fitting to the needs and wishes of senior citizens.

### What prevents measures considered useful from being implemented?

Measures for the elderly are often considered as being expensive by public institutions and decision makers. However, the costs aspect is often exaggerated, because they neither have nor are a strong lobby group that is able to put the responsible representatives of the authorities under pressure and make them send the necessary money.

According to the experts, decision makers, planners and practitioners who are usually car drivers have difficulties in seeing the world of mobility from the perspective of those people who use other modes or who use the existing transport facilities in a different way from them. There is a disappointing lack of understanding.

Seniors consider that their own loss of financial power, the frequent physical or mental limits linked to age, combined to the belief that pedestrians – a lot of whom are older people - are second class road users, gives them a low status and few possibilities to become a strong lobby group.

Regarding the issue of the seniors' defending their own "mobility rights", we find problems on at least two levels. Firstly, at the organisation level, it is difficult to find people capable of becoming suitable leaders. Also, seniors are often difficult to motivate to engage in activities. Thirdly, up to the present experience puts in doubt the independence of the seniors' advisory organisations, more often they are political lobby groups trying to present the responsible decision makers activities under a favourable perspective.

It is considered that legal preconditions that would enhance the mobility needs of seniors poor because these needs are not recognised, partly due to lack of the scientific studies. At the same time there are no powerful organisations that are able to insist effectively on achieving appropriate regulations. Moreover, such insistence should be accompanied by the argument that most measures to the advantage of the elderly also make

the life of many other people and groups easier.

Rural area problems, as well, seem to be denied by experts who are usually focused on the urban infrastructure.

## **Implication for decision-or policy-makers**

Financing lobby groups possibly connected to some sort of quality assurance of their lobby work would be a good way to enhance the implementation of useful measures. According to the interview results, if we want to promote the mobility of the elderly, we have:

- Firstly, to scrutinise the empathy and readiness of our society
- Secondly, to provide more information, assistance and services that support mobility in old age for the senior citizens themselves.
- Thirdly, to set different kinds of measures that reduce the complexity of modern traffic environment.

Public/state intervention is possible, or even necessary, in connection with the development and expression of attitudes. For instance, to propagate negative attitudes via commercials ("ageism") should be prohibited effectively. At the same time, propagating fair attitudes should be included into the state social policy.

The political systems have to take care of the financial situation of the elderly. Poverty in old age is one of the most compacts barriers against mobility. At the same time, quite a few elderly citizens are rather

wealthy and a new and important market segment is developing.

For older adults, increased presence of personnel in public spaces and in public transport would be helpful. By many interviewees, especially among the older people themselves, it is considered one of the best remedies against fear, disorientation and helplessness.

The introduction of free-travel pass throughout EU countries would be a desirable development given that public transport companies in Europe obtain important governmental funding for this.

A deeper understanding of the limitations and needs affecting groups such as the elderly should be included in the training of technical experts and people responsible for the older people's mobility. This training should be carefully prepared and studied by different professional associations and university departments.

The elderly population is very varied. This may explain why neither the experts, nor the general public, nor the elderly themselves can clearly identify their limits and needs. This ignorance undoubtedly contributes to the general public's lack of awareness of this problem.

It is necessary to educate the general public in order to change at least the stereotypical notion that only handicapped people in wheelchairs benefit from plans that improve accessibility and mobility conditions.

Given the fact that taxis and other modified vehicles are needed by the

elderly and offer many advantages for elderly travelling, the possibility of subsidies for the elderly should be considered.

The attitude that senior drivers are a problem and, therefore, they should stop driving is widespread. However, to keep their driving licences as long as possible is very useful for the elderly, specially in rural areas. Without starting a longer discussion on this at this place it can be said that there may be some problems with elderly persons' aptitude to drive cars, but there is also a considerable degree of compensatory behaviour in the positive sense: Seniors residing in rural areas use the car more often than seniors in urban areas, driving in dense city traffic is not that usual; elderly drivers often follow short and fixed driving routes and schedules in their area, peak hours and bad-weather conditions are usually avoided.

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## THE SIZE CONSORTIUM

14 SIZE Partners from 8 different countries:

Psychologists (behavioural sciences, gerontology, traffic and transport research), sociologists (gerontology, life-quality, traffic and transport research – traffic safety, mobility, sustainability), civil engineers and architects (urban research, sustainable urban development, road design, pedestrian mobility, vulnerable road users).

The researchers are supported by senior citizens associations in their countries. Five associations are members in the SIZE consortium.

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