



development dialogue paper
no.10 | june 2014

Post-2015
perspectives

Older Persons and the Post-2015 agenda – a sub-Saharan African's perspective

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There are multiple priorities under consideration in the post-2015 development agenda. If however, we are to approach the dialogue through a life-cycle lens, then the issues related to ageing and the demographic shifts cannot be left behind. Globally, by 2030, persons aged 60 and above (older persons) will outnumber children under the age of 10. As planning for the post-2015 era continues, there is a need to reassess our current policies and practice so that they are made fit for purpose in a greying world.

Africa is still referred to as a 'young' continent in terms of its demographics, yet it is ageing more rapidly than any other continent. In the current post-2015 discourse, we should address our unpreparedness in terms of utilising relevant economic, political and social opportunities as well as strengthening social protection measures for an ageing population.

Photo: Dietmar Temps



There is a dearth of information on ageing issues in the African region, resulting in low levels of awareness and policy decisions being made on limited evidence and data. Currently there are 59.7 million people over 60 years of age – that is, 6 per cent of the population. By 2050, there will be 215 million older people, or 10 per cent of the African population, despite HIV/AIDS, wars, famines and other natural and manmade disasters. HelpAge International's Global Age Watch Index (2013) featured only eight out of 54 African countries, illustrating an overall shortage of internationally comparable data measuring quality of life and wellbeing based on four domains: income security, health status, employment and education, and an enabling environment. Urbanisation and climate changes are also producing new and different sets of challenges, which could impact negatively on efforts to create age-friendly environments.

A further analysis of the ageing population indicates that in Africa nearly 30 per cent of women and over 50 per cent of men aged 65-plus continue to work. Although Africa has the world's highest rate of people employed, a large number are in the informal sector earning less than US\$2 a day. A significant number of older persons are farmers and, in some countries, there is an additional role of caregiving with over 60 per cent of orphaned and vulnerable children living with and being cared for by grandparents. Further, 90 per cent of AIDS care on the continent is provided at home, often by older people and usually by women. Their burden of care is further exacerbated by high unemployment, especially among the youth whom they are supporting through informal and formal education and on their own insecure incomes and limited social protection.

It is also clear that:

- » Psychosocial support and resources are clearly limited for older persons bringing up grandchildren in an ever-evolving digital world. Older persons are excluded from vital support and resources as many do not have access to or understanding of how to use a computer, the Internet or cell phones, further making an intergenerational gap between them and their grandchildren.
- » Learning from development programmes on the impact of the grandchildren's educational outcomes and social wellbeing, when coming from environments where older caregivers suffer from resource constraints, should continually be shared. This is especially important when the grandparents' own low level of education is a key consideration.

- » Older men and women continue to play important roles in helping communities deal with recovery from natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. They are also the guardians of African history and our culture, whether positive or negative.

Challenges facing the ageing agenda in sub-Saharan Africa

Whilst the majority of sub-Saharan Africa is following gerontocratic systems of government, politicians and decision-makers are facing a crisis of prioritisation of ageing issues, in the midst of optimism from those who are championing the 'Africa Rising' agenda. With the current youth bulge, half of the current African population is under the age of 14 years and the majority who reach the age of employment are unemployed or under-employed. The socioeconomic burden of mass unemployment is immense and in such a scenario of competing priorities, there is little political will to ensure that the ageing population is given priority consideration. This, however, is a shortsighted approach since the youth bulge will eventually turn into an age bulge. The dearth of research studies and data is also impacting negatively on advocacy and policy planning and influencing related to ageing and the life-cycle approach. In countries where efforts are being made to address social protection as a means of ending poverty, there is limited ownership and fiscal space to accommodate the schemes and over-reliance by governments on pilot schemes driven by unsustainable donor-funded initiatives to improve and even provide access to basic services such as quality healthcare for all.

Other factors that are influencing the sub-Saharan African debate on ageing include:

- » Impact of rural to urban and economic migration on households headed by older persons and the negative effect on the quality of care and wellbeing of those left behind, whether adults or children.
- » Human rights violations and marginalisation of vulnerable populations who have limited voices in policy- and decision-making. This can include double discrimination, based on age and gender, against older women.
- » Limited understanding of the demographic dividend debate, including the impact of current falling numbers of births and of the projected rise of 15-64 year olds as a proportion of the population, from 56 per cent at present to 64.3 per cent by 2080.

» Societal perceptions of ageing, which is viewed, not as a positive experience but a burden. Some types of violence against older persons stem from this attitude.

Societal changes to accommodate the post-2015 discourse on ageing

A positive development within the current post-2015 discourse is the debate on ageing and how marginalised groups including older persons can become more visible in future development planning and practice. There is also growing awareness that older persons cannot continue to be invisible and their numbers are increasing as a result of improved health care and standards of living, even though this may not be a continental phenomenon. Partnerships, solidarity and alliances with other vulnerable populations have resulted in a seat at the development agenda table, since older persons' issues resonate with those of children, women, the youth, and people with disability. However, governments will only pay attention when strong economic arguments and empirical evidence is presented on why it is to our detriment that we continue ignoring the ageing population.

At the regional level, the African Union (AU) has made a breakthrough by crafting the 2013 Common Position on Ageing. Discussions are also underway to create a common AU post-2015 development agenda that acknowledges the increasing ageing population and their needs, which can be addressed through domestic resource mobilisation to support sustainable development. Governments are increasingly aware of the need to create an enabling environment for civil society to support government development initiatives, evidence-based decision-making and continued work on poverty eradication.

Recent platforms on older persons' issues have included the Working Group on Ageing and Disability at the UN Post-2015 High Level Panel Meeting in Monrovia, Liberia, in 2013. However, the synergy among development actors still needs strengthening, so that dialogue among vulnerable populations is not reduced to a 'fight' for limited political space, goodwill and resources. All players are aware that policy engagement is a complex, long-term process and sufficient investment of time and other resources is needed for any chance of success. Civil society organisations in particular now have to acquire different sets of skills from those they traditionally

relied upon, if they are to make their own and older persons' voices heard as part of global policy-influencing.

There are other societal changes to be debated, including prioritisation by African governments of ageing issues which incorporate intergenerational solutions and inclusive policies as well as institutional frameworks which include social security for older persons. Success on this front can only be achieved after acknowledging national policy implementation weaknesses and identifying ways of overcoming them. One solution is training and awareness-raising among policy-makers and our populations on the life-cycle approach to the ageing agenda. Cultural shifts related to caring for older persons also need to happen, for example objective debates on the quality of current caregiving of older persons by children and relatives in the home, residential care systems and the creation of age-friendly cities.

Highlighting the gender dimensions of ageing is also critical, since the needs and concerns of older men are not necessarily those of older women. Treating Africa as a continent and not a country and so accepting its diversity in terms of aspirations and solutions for its ageing population is another important consideration. This ties in with ensuring that there is more research and evidence-based information-sharing, including promoting data disaggregation by age, sex and disability.

Moving forward

As we approach the end of the current Millennium Development Goals, which are silent on the life-cycle approach to development, it is not too late to evaluate progress by country, through for example resourcing the development of an African Union Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Older Persons in Africa. The results would then be utilised as a baseline to ensure that the post-2015 development framework incorporates goals, targets and indicators that are responsive to different stages of the life course. A number of African countries have commendable age-friendly legislation and national policies on ageing. The issue, however, is whether there is enough political will and whether levels of accountability exist to ensure effective implementation of legislation and the creation of new age- and gender-sensitive policies that benefit the whole population.

There is still time to continue to promote civil society capacity-building for effective participation in policy-influencing up to the global level. Further recommendations and important milestones include: mainstreaming a life-cycle approach within development partners', public, private-sector and civil society actors' programmes and prioritising exploration of means to support social, political and economic reform as part of the Africa Rising agenda. This can be achieved through a variety of ways: multi-sectoral dialogue involving civil society, public and private sectors, more efficient tax collection and fiscal management, more creative use of diaspora remittances and reduction of both corruption and illicit money flows.

As climate change continues to be a growing concern, especially among our predominantly agrarian populations, sub-Saharan's economic, and sociopolitical vulnerability will increase through threats of food insecurity and drought. Older persons therefore have to be made a part of the solution as small hold landowners and farmers who

can promote adaptation and mitigating measures in their communities. Continental champions need to continue to be identified to promote further research and learning on gerontology, geriatrics and the demographic dividend. In the post-2015 framework development process, a cadre of older persons aligned with other vulnerable populations can successfully promote voices advocating for a life worth living in our societies.



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Development dialogue paper series

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