

# Asia-Pacific Report on Population Ageing 2022

Trends, policies and good practices regarding  
older persons and population ageing





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## Foreword

In 2022, one in seven people are aged 60 years or older in Asia and the Pacific. By 2050, one in four people are projected to belong to this age group. Thus, the share and the number of older persons in the region is growing very fast, and, compared to other world regions, at an unprecedented pace. Although population ageing is a human success story – the result of improved public health and medical advancements, and overall socioeconomic development – it also presents challenges that are exacerbated when it occurs rapidly and affects a large number of people.



Almost 20 years ago, United Nations Member States recognized that – due to the historic shift from high to low levels of mortality and fertility, coupled with increased longevity, or the demographic transition – the world was undergoing a transformation from a mostly youthful population to a population with a growing share of older persons. In order to address the challenges and opportunities of this transformation, and to build a society for all ages, they adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the global guiding framework on this topic.

This report has been prepared in follow up to the Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, convened from 29 June to 1 July 2022. It draws together documents prepared for the review and appraisal process, including voluntary national survey responses by ESCAP members and associate members, summaries of consultations with civil society organizations, and the report and outcome document adopted at the intergovernmental meeting. It combines qualitative and quantitative analysis at national, subregional and regional levels, and considers good practices and lessons learned in national implementation, while addressing emerging issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and digital transformations.

The analysis – which is highly relevant to policymakers, academics, United Nations entities and civil society organizations – shows that countries have come far, but challenges remain. New laws and action plans have been adopted and implemented, many of them focusing on healthy ageing, care, social protection, life-long learning, gender, age-based discrimination and abuse. Yet, as some of the main challenges, countries have identified misconceptions and stereotypes about population ageing and older persons, lack of data at the national and subnational levels, and lack of human resources dedicated to population ageing. Moreover, the promotion and protection of the human rights of older persons remains a challenge. Providing social protection, affordable and universal access to health care, including long-term care, and the integration of health and social care remain distant goals for several countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the lives of many older persons and their families. At the same time, good practices have emerged from the pandemic, such as the use of telehealth, upskilling and reskilling prospects for older persons, and opportunities for intergenerational exchange. For the first time in an ESCAP survey leading up to a review and appraisal of the Madrid Plan of Action, a sizable number of countries reported on efforts to address the impact of climate change on older persons and on how they contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Member States also acknowledged the synergies between the Madrid Plan of Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing. Most importantly, member States and stakeholders emphasized that older persons are development actors, and their voices and actions must be recognized.

This is the first review and appraisal of the Madrid Plan of Action in Asia and the Pacific to take place during the Decade of Action. ESCAP works closely with member States and civil society to build capacity, support national assessments, and share experiences and good practices. ESCAP also collaborates with member States and civil society to enhance existing and new forward-looking policies and action plans, as mandated in the outcome document of the fourth review and appraisal. This report and a related dedicated website: <https://www.population-trends-asiapacific.org> present the latest information and tools on population ageing in Asia and the Pacific. They provide the basis for supporting member States and civil society in accelerating the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action in the region.

ESCAP stands ready to work closely with its member States and stakeholders to build a sustainable society for all ages in Asia and the Pacific.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Salsiah'.

**Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana**

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations  
and Executive Secretary of ESCAP

## Executive summary

### Asia and the Pacific is ageing very rapidly

In 2022, 670 million people aged 60 years or older reside in Asia and the Pacific, roughly one in every seven people. It is projected that by 2050 that number will have doubled to 1.3 billion, or one in four people. Older women account for 54 per cent of Asia and the Pacific's older persons, and, given their longer life expectancy, that share increases with age. Compared with other regions of the world, population ageing in Asia and the Pacific is very rapid, the result of drastic declines in fertility and mortality, and increased life expectancy. Given the sheer number of older persons, what happens to them in the region will shape trends at the global level. Moreover, because population ageing is occurring so quickly, countries in the region have little time to address its challenges and opportunities.

More people are surviving to old age, and those who do tend to live longer. However, even with longer life expectancy, it is projected that older persons will spend an increasing number of their later years in ill health. This will affect women in particular, because they generally outlive men. Demographic and epidemiological transitions have resulted in a rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs). These have become the leading cause of death in older persons, both in Asia and the Pacific, and globally. Nonetheless, in lower-middle income and low-income countries, older persons are still threatened by communicable diseases. Such countries face a double burden of disease.

As people age, they are more likely to be affected by disability. It is estimated that Asia and the Pacific is home to more than 700 million persons with disabilities, most of them older persons. A recent study noted that, in 2020, there were 59 million people with dementia globally, including 29 million in Asia (He and others, 2022). Older persons with disabilities often have compounding vulnerabilities and face significant barriers to full and effective participation in society. Moreover, women, especially those in developing countries, often enter old age with the accumulation of a lifetime of gender-based disadvantages. Over the life course, they typically have had fewer opportunities for education, lower likelihood of being covered by social protection, and limited access to health services, land ownership and income. In old age, they frequently continue to

perform unpaid care work in the home and often must work to maintain their own livelihoods. These challenges and obstacles affect their social and economic situation in later life and increase their risk of living in poverty, ill-health and isolation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the health, and social and economic situation of older persons in the region. Based on the latest data, between 2019 and 2021, older persons at age 60 in Asia and the Pacific lost 1.5 years in life expectancy, due mostly to COVID-19. In addition to the direct effects, movement restrictions, lockdowns and delaying regular health check-ups have had significant physical, social and mental health impacts on older persons. Particularly for those living alone, social isolation has been accompanied by loss of social support. Access to information and communications technology (ICT) has been crucial for mitigating the negative social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, owing to the "grey" and gender-related digital divides, not all older persons have benefitted from ICTs. Existing digital inequalities have been further exacerbated for many during the pandemic. In spite of this, throughout the pandemic, older persons have served as caregivers and provided crucial social and economic support to family and friends.

### Older persons are development actors

As population ageing has been featuring more prominently on national agendas, governments in Asia and the Pacific have established or strengthened existing government bodies, coordination mechanisms, and national committees that oversee relevant policies and programmes. They have also adopted or revised policies and action plans on older persons. Although COVID-19 has affected the adoption and implementation of some plans, considerable progress has been made throughout the region. Many of these new laws or programmes focus on health and healthy ageing, care, social protection and gender. From the voluntary national survey developed and administered by ESCAP in lead up to the mid-2022 intergovernmental meeting to review and appraise the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action in Asia and the Pacific, several member States reported having taken measures to promote the active participation of older persons in society. That stated, it was noted that the level of actual involvement of older persons in formulating plans and measures varied. Nevertheless, countries and stakeholders unanimously acknowledged the



need to improve the position of older persons, in particular older women, in society and called for changing perceptions of ageing among both younger and older generations.

Community-based older people's associations (OPAs) play an important role in ensuring greater participation of older persons in policy and decision-making and in improving their living conditions. Almost all countries in the region now have OPAs of some kind. Moreover, many countries reported on volunteer initiatives with older persons as active participants or as recipients of volunteer assistance or support. These activities provide training opportunities, social participation and inclusion, and strengthen intergenerational solidarity. Countries have also implemented measures to enhance social and cultural recognition of older persons.

An important factor in ensuring active participation of older persons in society and development is continued involvement in the paid labour force. Older persons who remain in the workforce longer can maintain income security as well as their physical and mental health (Dannefer, 2003). Household and employment survey data show that many older persons in Asia and the Pacific are still employed, but older women in particular work mostly in the informal sector. Jobs in this sector, however, do not provide social protection, leaving older persons vulnerable and dependent on families and societies. To address this, some countries in the region provide decent, age-friendly and flexible employment opportunities for older persons. There are examples of re-skilling, upskilling and job-matching, as well as incentives for employers to retain or rehire older workers. However, age discrimination in the workplace still occurs in many countries in Asia and the Pacific, and only a few reported on legislation regulating the preferences, needs and rights of older persons in the labour market.

The majority of countries reported on initiatives that support access to knowledge, education and training over the life course, including in old age. Nevertheless, access to such services in rural areas and by older women were reported as lacking. Many countries reported promoting digital literacy via training and re-education programmes.

According to ESCAP survey responses, most countries plan to provide the protection necessary to assure minimum living standards for older

persons. Several countries reported having programmes to enable all workers to acquire basic social protection/social security, including, where applicable, pensions, disability insurance and health benefits. However, overall coverage levels remain low in several countries, with benefit levels barely covering daily expenses.

## Healthy ageing is a must

The majority of countries in Asia and the Pacific, in particular those in East and North-East Asia, and South and South-east Asia, have established measures to promote healthy and active ageing of older persons. They have expanded health-care access and initiatives that empower older persons to exercise their rights and live with dignity. Moreover, awareness around healthy ageing has increased since the third review and appraisal of the Madrid Plan of Action, in 2017. However, gaps between policies and implementation remain and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, coverage, accessibility and affordability of certain policies and programmes directed at older persons continue to pose a challenge.

National health strategies and plans exist in almost all countries in the region. Many of these target the general population and are integrated into high-level health or ageing policies and plans, and they often reflect action on NCDs. Several countries reported on dedicated strategies and policies supporting the well-being of older persons, but most initiatives concern treatment rather than prevention or promotion of health and well-being. Also reported were good practices on health screening programmes and health education of older persons. During the COVID-19 pandemic, OPAs and civil society organizations have played an important role in providing health services, promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting the well-being of older persons.

Integrating health and social care can support improved health and social care outcomes for older persons, and countries in Asia and the Pacific reported growing recognition of the need to adopt more holistic approaches to health-care provision. In some countries, such measures are a part of national strategic planning frameworks, while in others they are addressed at the institutional level. In addition, various social protection programmes that integrate health and social care were reported.

Improvements in universal access to health care have been documented in Asia-Pacific countries. Nevertheless, health-care coverage can vary widely, particularly as it affects persons in vulnerable situations, including older persons. Importantly, when assessing the availability and access of these services, financing must be considered. In many countries, public health-care expenditures are low, leading to high out-of-pocket expenditures. Since health-care expenditures tend to increase with age, countries with high out-of-pocket expenditures, in particular, face challenges in transitioning from “ageing” to “aged” and “super-aged” societies.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past years, countries in Asia and the Pacific have developed or expanded their long-term care systems (ADB, 2021). Several countries have implemented some form of long-term care, including in-home, residential and community services. However, coverage levels, quality and affordability vary. Existing services are fragmented and in need of strong coordination. Measures to increase the quality of long-term care services to older persons range from community care to integrated approaches that promote health and prevention as part of broader systems of social protection. Access to long-term care was reported as limited for poor and homeless older persons, especially in remote areas. Indeed, providing long-term care to older persons has been particularly challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of countries in the region also reported on the need for more specialized health and long-term care services, including geriatric and, specifically, gerontological training programmes.

ICTs are improving the ways that older persons receive care and their access to health-related information. In some circumstances, ICTs are reshaping health-care systems in fundamental

Asia-Pacific regional review and appraisal. However, in most cases, mental health initiatives relevant to older persons are subsumed under broader health strategies, programmes or frameworks. Some countries reported on recent initiatives aimed at addressing dementia, as well as educational and awareness-raising initiatives focusing on mental health. Despite such developments, there is insufficient data on the mental and neurological health of older persons, including longitudinal data.

Incidence of impairment and disability increases with age, and older persons, in particular older women, are often also persons with disabilities. The effects of impairment and disability are exacerbated by negative stereotypes, discrimination and abuse. All countries responding to the survey reported taking measures to support older persons with disabilities, such as rehabilitation services, appropriate care, and provision of assistive devices and social transfers, including disability allowances. Mostly, countries reported on general policies and laws that include disability measures. Only some countries have comprehensive measures that explicitly address the concerns of older persons with disabilities.

### Enabling and supportive environments allow older persons to remain active, productive and fulfilled

Traditionally, older persons in Asia and the Pacific have lived with other family members. In most countries this still holds true, but urbanization, migration and shrinking family sizes are resulting in more older persons living alone, especially older women. Many countries in the region are promoting some form of ‘ageing in place’. There is also some awareness of age- and disability-friendly

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