

Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge

Executive Summary



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HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives. Our work is strengthened through our global network of like-minded organizations – the only one of its kind in the world.

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Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge

Population ageing is one of the most significant trends of the 21st century. It has important and far-reaching implications for all aspects of society. Around the world, two persons celebrate their sixtieth birthday every second – an annual total of almost 58 million sixtieth birthdays. With one in nine persons in the world aged 60 years or over, projected to increase to one in five by 2050, population ageing is a phenomenon that can no longer be ignored.

Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge analyses the current situation of older persons and reviews progress in policies and actions taken by governments and other stakeholders since the Second World Assembly on Ageing in implementing the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing to respond to the opportunities and challenges of an ageing world. It provides many inspiring examples of innovative programmes that successfully address ageing issues and the concerns of older persons.

The report identifies gaps and provides recommendations for the way forward to ensure a society for all ages in which both young and old are given the opportunity to contribute to development and share in its benefits. A unique feature of the report is a focus on the voices of older persons themselves, captured through consultations with older men and women around the world.

The report, which is the product of a collaboration of over twenty United Nations entities and major international organizations working in the area of population ageing, shows that important progress has been made by many countries in adopting new policies, strategies, plans and laws on ageing, but that much more needs to be done to fully implement the Madrid Plan and fulfil the potential of our ageing world.

Population ageing

Population ageing is happening in all regions and in countries at various levels of development. It is progressing fastest in developing countries, including in those that also have a large population of young people. Of the current 15 countries with more than 10 million older persons, seven of these are developing countries.

Ageing is a triumph of development. Increasing longevity is one of humanity's greatest achievements. People live longer because of improved nutrition, sanitation, medical advances, health care, education and economic well-being.

Life expectancy at birth is over 80 now in 33 countries; just five years ago, only 19 countries had reached this. Many of those reading this report will live into their 80s, 90s, and even 100s. At present, only Japan has an older population of more than 30 per cent; by 2050, 64 countries are expected to join Japan with an older population of more than 30 per cent. The opportunities that this demographic shift presents are as endless as the contributions that a socially and economically active, secure and healthy ageing population can bring to society.

Population ageing also presents social, economic and cultural challenges to individuals, families, societies and the global community. As United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon points out in the Preface to the report, "the social and economic implications of this phenomenon are profound, extending far beyond the individual older person and the immediate family, touching broader society and the global community in unprecedented ways". It is how we choose to address the challenges and maximize the opportunities of a growing older population that will determine whether society will reap the benefits of the "longevity dividend".

With the number and proportion of older persons growing faster than any other age group, and in an increasing range of countries, there are concerns about the capacities of societies to address the challenges associated with this demographic shift.

To face the challenges and also take advantage of the opportunities resulting from population ageing, this report calls for new approaches to the way that societies, workforces, and social and intergenerational relations are structured. These must be sustained by a strong political commitment and a solid data and knowledge base that ensure an effective integration of global ageing within the larger processes of development. People everywhere must age with dignity and security, enjoying life through the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Looking at both challenges and opportunities is the best recipe for success in an ageing world.

The ageing transformation

A population is classified as ageing when older people become a proportionately larger share of the total population. Declining fertility rates and increasing survival at older ages have led to population ageing. Life expectancy at birth has risen substantially across the world. In 2010-2015, life expectancy is 78 years in developed countries and 68 years in developing regions. By 2045-2050, newborns can expect to live to 83 years in developed regions and 74 years in developing regions.

In 1950, there were 205 million persons aged 60 years or over in the world. By 2012, the number of older persons increased to almost 810 million. It is projected to reach 1 billion in less than ten years and double by 2050, reaching 2 billion. There are marked differences between regions. For example, in 2012, 6 per cent of the population in Africa was 60 years and over, compared with 10 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 11 per cent in Asia, 15 per cent in Oceania, 19 per cent in Northern America, and 22 per cent in Europe. By 2050, it is expected that 10 per cent of the population in Africa will be 60 years and over, compared with 24 per cent in Asia, 24 per cent in Oceania, 25 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 27 per cent in Northern America, and 34 per cent in Europe.

Globally, women form the majority of older persons. Today, for every 100 women aged 60 or over worldwide, there are just 84 men. For every 100 women aged 80 or over, there are only 61 men. Men and women experience old age differently. Gender relations structure the entire lifecourse, influencing access to resources and opportunities, with an impact that is both ongoing and cumulative.

In many situations, older women are usually more vulnerable to discrimination, including poor access to jobs and healthcare, subjection to abuse, denial of the right to own and inherit property, and lack of basic minimum income and social security. But older men, particularly after retirement, may also become vulnerable due to their weaker social support networks and can also be subject to abuse, particularly financial abuse. These differences have important implications for public policy and programme planning.

The older generation is not a homogenous group for which one-size-fits-all policies are sufficient. It is important not to

standardize older people as a single category but to recognize that the older population is just as diverse as any other age group, in terms of, for example, age, sex, ethnicity, education, income and health. Each group of older persons, such as those who are poor, women, men, oldest old, indigenous, illiterate, urban or rural, has particular needs and interests that must be addressed specifically through tailored programmes and intervention models.

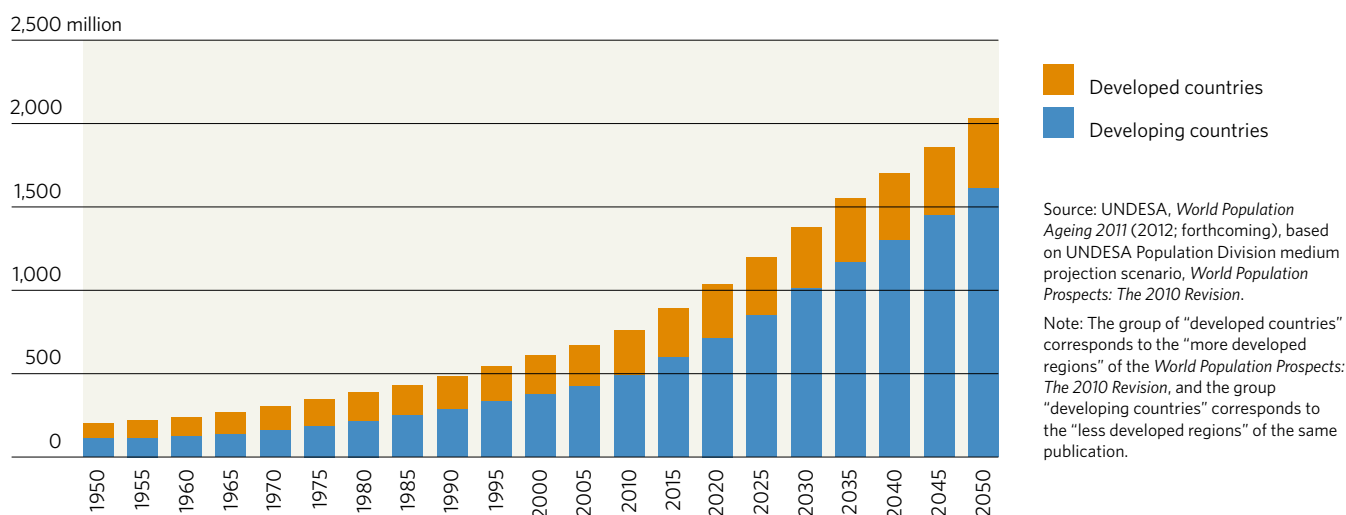
The Second World Assembly on Ageing

The Second World Assembly on Ageing, convened in Madrid, Spain in 2002, to address the challenges of rapid population ageing, adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing which focused on mainstreaming older persons in development, advancing health and well-being into old age, and ensuring enabling and supportive environments.

The Madrid Plan calls for changes in attitudes, policies and practices to ensure that older persons are not viewed simply as welfare beneficiaries but as active participants in the development process whose rights must be respected. *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge* is a contribution to the ten-year review and appraisal of progress towards implementation of the Madrid Plan.

A key finding of this report is the incredible productivity and contributions of those aged 60 and over, as caregivers, voters, volunteers, entrepreneurs and more. The report shows that, with the right measures in place to secure health care, regular income, social networks and legal protection, there is a longevity dividend to be reaped worldwide by current and future generations.

Number of people aged 60 or over: World, developed and developing countries, 1950-2050



The report makes the case for national and local governments, international organizations, communities, and civil society to fully commit to a concerted global effort to realign 21st century society to fit the realities of 21st century demographics. It points out that concrete, cost-effective advances will come from ensuring that age investment begins at birth.

Income security

Among the most urgent concerns of older persons worldwide is income security. This, together with health, is most frequently mentioned by older persons themselves. These issues are also among the greatest challenges for governments faced with ageing populations. The global economic crisis has exacerbated the financial pressure to ensure both economic security and access to health care in old age.

Investments in pension systems are seen as one of the most important ways to ensure economic independence and reduce poverty in old age. Sustainability of these systems is of particular concern, particularly in developed countries, while social protection and old-age pension coverage remain a challenge for developing countries, where a large proportion of the labour force is found in the informal sector.

Social protection floors must be implemented in order to guarantee income security and access to essential health and social services for all older persons and provide a safety net that contributes to the postponement of disability and prevention of impoverishment in old age. There is no solid evidence that population ageing per se has undermined economic development or that countries do not have sufficient resources to ensure pensions and health care for an older population. Nevertheless, globally, only one third of countries have comprehensive social protection schemes, most of which only cover those in formal employment, or less than half of the economically active population worldwide.

While pensions, and particularly social pensions, are an important end in themselves, since they make a big difference in the well-being of older persons, they have also been shown to benefit entire families. In times of crisis, pensions can constitute the main source of household income, and often enable young people and their families to cope with the shortage or loss of employment.

Access to quality health care

In order to realize their right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, older persons must have access to age-friendly and affordable health-care information and services that meet their needs. This includes preventive, curative and long-term care. A lifecourse perspective should include health promotion and disease prevention activities that focus on maintaining independence, preventing and delaying disease and disability, and providing treatment. Policies are needed to promote healthy lifestyles, assistive technology, medical research and rehabilitative care.

Growing flowers for sale in Myanmar.



Joanne Hill/HelpAge International

Training of caregivers and health professionals is essential to ensure that those who work with older persons have access to information and basic training in the care of older people. Better support must be provided to all caregivers, including family members, community-based carers, particularly for long-term care for frail older persons, and older people who care for others.

The report points out that good health must lie at the core of society's response to population ageing. Ensuring that people, while living longer lives, live healthier lives will result in greater opportunities and lower costs to older persons, their families and society.

Enabling environments

An age-friendly physical environment that promotes the development and use of innovative technologies that encourage active ageing is especially important as people grow older and experience diminished mobility and visual and hearing impairments. Affordable housing and easily accessible transportation that encourage ageing in place are essential to maintain independence, facilitate social contacts and permit older persons to remain active members of society.

More must be done to expose, investigate and prevent discrimination, abuse and violence against older persons, especially women who are more vulnerable. There has been some progress in promoting the human rights of older persons, notably discussions centring on the development of international human rights instruments that specifically address older persons.

The way forward

In many parts of the world, families have the main responsibility for the care and financial support of older dependants. The resulting costs can be extreme for working-age generations, often affecting their savings capacity, employability and productivity. However, private transfers from family can no longer automatically be considered as the only source of income for older family members.

The report shows how living arrangements of older people are changing in tune with changes in societies. Family sizes are decreasing and intergenerational support systems will continue to be exposed to important changes, particularly in the years to come. There are significant numbers of "skipped-generation" households consisting of children and older people, especially in rural areas, as a result of rural-to-urban migration of "middle-generation" adults. Consultations with older persons around the world point to many cases in which older persons provide assistance to adult children and grandchildren, not only with childcare and housework, but also with substantial financial contributions to the family.

The report stresses the need to address current societal inequalities by ensuring equal access of all segments of the population to education, employment, health care and basic social services that will enable people to live decently in the present and save for the future. It calls for strong investments in human capital by improving the education and employment prospects of the current generation of young people.

Population ageing presents challenges for governments and society, but need not be seen as a crisis. It can and should be planned for in order to transform these challenges into opportunities. This report lays out a compelling rationale for investments that ensure a good quality of life when people age and suggests positive solutions, which are feasible even for poorer countries.

The voices of older persons who took part in consultations for this report reiterate a need for income security, flexible employment opportunities, access to affordable health care and medicines, age-friendly housing and transportation, and elimination of discrimination, violence and abuse targeted at older people. Again and again, older persons

Ten priority actions to maximize the opportunity of ageing populations

1. Recognize the inevitability of population ageing and the need to adequately prepare all stakeholders (governments, civil society, private sector, communities, and families) for the growing numbers of older persons. This should be done by enhancing understanding, strengthening national and local capacities, and developing the political, economic and social reforms needed to adapt societies to an ageing world.
2. Ensure that all older persons can live with dignity and security, enjoying access to essential health and social services and a minimum income through the implementation of national social protection floors and other social investments that extend the autonomy and independence of older people, prevent impoverishment in old age and contribute to a more healthy ageing. These actions should be based on a long-term vision, and supported by a strong political commitment and a secured budget that prevents negative impacts in time of crisis or governmental changes.
3. Support communities and families to develop support systems which ensure that frail older persons receive the long-term care they need and promote active and healthy ageing at the local level to facilitate ageing in place.
4. Invest in young people today by promoting healthy habits, and ensuring education and employment opportunities, access to health services, and social security coverage for all workers as the best investment to improve the lives of future generations of older persons. Flexible employment, lifelong learning and retraining opportunities should be promoted to facilitate the integration in the labour market of current generations of older persons.
5. Support international and national efforts to develop comparative research on ageing, and ensure that gender- and culture-sensitive data and evidence from this research are available to inform policymaking.
6. Mainstream ageing into all gender policies and gender into ageing policies, taking into account the specific requirements of older women and men.
7. Ensure inclusion of ageing and the needs of older persons in all national development policies and programmes.

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