

OLDER VOICES IN DEVELOPMENT: MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE

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Introduction

The first International Plan of Action on Ageing was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1982, with 1 October designated as the UN's International Day of Older Persons. This was followed in 1991 by the UN Assembly's adoption of the United Nations' Principles for Older Persons (independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity), which encouraged governments to incorporate older people into national development programmes. 1999 was designated as the Year of Older Persons with the theme 'Towards a Society for All Ages' and the key principle of 'Active Ageing'. A second and major World Assembly was held in Madrid in 2002 and a second International Plan of Action agreed; in 2007 a mid-term review of progress was conducted. The general sense from much of the literature that came out of the review is that little progress has been made in putting older people substantially on the development agenda and implementation was viewed as 'patchy and inconsistent' (Help Age International, 2009c:4). For example, in Europe and North America only 31 of 56 United Nations member states submitted country reports on progress (United Nations, 2002). In recent years, there has been a move towards the adoption of a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons which would lend more legal binding mechanisms to the implementation of rights for older people.

The 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing also offers aid agencies, governments and other institutions an opportunity to place older people alongside others in the centre of development discourse. It offers a clear statement about how and why older people need to engage with, and be engaged by, those working in the aid sector. It pledges to extend the right to development to older persons and to halve their poverty by 2015 in line with the first Millennium Development Goal. The Action Plan sets as the decade's priorities: the participation of older people in policy making; advancement of health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments for older people (United Nations, 2002). It can be used both as an advocacy and an awareness-raising tool. However despite the achievement of adopting such a Plan, older people remain a low priority for governments, donors and aid agencies: '[w]here there are policies, they often emphasise older

people as passive recipients of benefits and medical services rather than promoting active ageing with full participation in society' (Help Age International, 2007a:4). The needs, rights and contributions of older people, especially in the global South, are not well understood in comparison with those of other population groups. The stereotype of older people as a 'burden' versus a 'resource' seriously hinders opportunities to harness the contribution of an active older generation to development. As Aurelina Curay, Director of the Geron Foundation indicated: 'We need to stop treating everyone over 60 as a weak passive recipient of benefits (Help Age International, 2007a:20)'

The practice context

A number of key issues have begun to actively inform development discourse with regard to ageing. Not least of these is often described - pejoratively - as the 'demographic time bomb'. This debate almost exclusively focuses on pressure on the labour force, old age dependency ratios, and most vocally, the high cost of pensions and health care provision. It fails entirely to acknowledge the remarkable cultural, social and professional capacity of older, more experienced, people. Their on-going role, often unpaid in support of families and communities, is almost completely overlooked. Policy makers tend to be negatively influenced by stereotyping, pre-conceptions, prejudice and ageism.

The facts

The world's population is experiencing exponential and unprecedented change in relation to ageing. One of the latest United States Department of Commerce's Global Ageing Reports, *An Aging World 2008*, draws attention to the historic transition that is currently taking place. It states that in less than 10 years, there will be more people aged 65 and older than children under 5 years. The number of people aged 80 and over is estimated to increase by 233 per cent between 2008 and 2040. Currently 64 per cent of older people live in 'less developed' regions; by 2050 this will be 80 per cent. Even in the 'least developed' countries, adults who survive to 60 can expect to live an additional 15 years. Globally the 60-79 and 80+ age groups are growing the fastest. In less than a decade, Latin America and Asia will have the highest proportions of over-65s than Europe and North America have today, and Africa will have reached the same level of older people as Europe had in the mid 20th century (US Department of Commerce, 1993). This is primarily happening due to sharp increases in life expectancy accompanied by substantial falls in fertility all

over the world. The myth that most older people live in ‘developed’ countries is simply incorrect.

Barriers to the engagement of older people as active actors

Older people are alienated from society for a whole range of reasons, not least being their forced exclusion from the labour market. They have a distinct lack of access to the new opportunities that social, and sometimes political, change has afforded younger people, such as social networking. The shift to the information age has left many older people behind, as re-training opportunities are rarely extended to those over 50 years of age, further alienating them from an ever-changing world. Discrimination at institutional level translates into the dismissal of older people as a ‘vulnerable’ social group, and their omission from powerful national strategies. ‘A social protection of the ageing population has...largely escaped the international donor agenda, which in turn has left little resources for NGOs to address the problems (of poverty and exclusion) effectively’ (Help Age International, 2007a:21).

One of the main obstacles to the low prioritisation of ageing on the policy and funding agenda is the ‘stubborn image of older people as passive recipients of benefits’ (ibid.:22), with solutions centred on services and medical supports. Interventions ignore the concept of active ageing, active participation in society, policy development and access to information. For example in Colombia, with 3.5 million people displaced, data is not desegregated by age and older people ‘are almost completely absent in policy and programmes by governments and NGOs’ (Help Age International, 2009b). Responses to the needs of older people has often been developed in terms of ‘service delivery’ which rarely embraces an advocacy role. New responses need to embrace advocacy as a key vehicle for improving both policy and practice.

“Some cars come by and just threw the packets (of relief aid). The fastest get the food, the strong one wins. The elderly and the injured don’t get anything. We feel like dogs” (Perumal, India, aged 75).

“Staff at the district hospital made older people wait longer than younger patients. They said it was a waste of time seeing older people. We arranged to meet the medical office in charge. Since the meeting health staff have treated older people with some respect” (Mukima, Kenya, aged 76).

In Bangladesh, Abdul Rab still works as a bicycle rickshaw puller at the age of 82: 'I am still fit enough. I use my wages to pay for family expenses such as rice and clothing. I also pay for one of my grandchildren's education, as her father is dead' (Help Age International, 2009a). Across the world, in Ireland and elsewhere, older people are making an invaluable contribution to society. 40-60 per cent of orphaned children in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Namibia are cared for by their grandmothers while in Mozambique, where older people make up 5.4 per cent of the population, they care for 54 per cent of orphaned children (Help Age International, 2007b). However these same older people are invisible when it comes to allocating resources in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Their contribution goes largely unrecognised and their issues are rarely included in political debates or development plans. The general view that older people do not really matter is pervasive. Migrant policy in most countries fails to recognise those left behind, the most vulnerable older people and children. And the UN Programme on Ageing has a staff of just four (Help Age International, 2007b:4). A study by Help Age International (Help Age International, 2009c) showed that treaty bodies tasked with monitoring how human rights conventions are implemented rarely ask countries to observe the rights of older people in their review.: 'The special rapporteurs and independent experts whose role it is to examine specific rights or geographical areas have failed to consider older men and women in their work' (ibid.:5). Older people also remain invisible in the new Universal Periodic Review system, where every UN member state reports to the Rights Council on its human rights record:

"It is important that we tell the society we exist as individuals and as members of the society. Many forgot about us: people that we used to work with, newspaper sellers, children from the neighbourhood. Only through our active participation...can we tell them that we are here and we work for ourselves as well as for other people and other generations" (Help Age International, 2007a).

Implications for development

The global phenomenon of ageing requires international, national and local action. 'In an increasingly interconnected world, failure to deal with this demographic imperative and rapid changes...in a rational way in any part of the world will have socio-economic and political consequences everywhere (WHO, 2002)'. With older people immediately increasing as a major population cohort, their contribution to development, through their cultural, political,

professional and social wisdom and skills can make a major impact on developing to a globe for all ages.

Global research indicates that poverty among older people is high, and with growing numbers, this will be a critical element for governments, donors and aid agencies in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and in particular MDG 1 – the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Because of poverty and limited economic security in older age, more than 70 per cent of older men and around 40 per cent of older women in the least developed countries continue to be economically active, mainly in the informal sector. Many lack access to basic services such as pensions, health, water and sanitation. Many are illiterate, do not have identity papers in place or face tremendous barriers to accessing their entitlements. Older people are often excluded from decision-making processes because of their age, gender, ethnicity and class. In addition, people can suffer overlapping forms of discrimination throughout their life course which influence their lack of opportunities and advantages in old age.

Poverty of older people compared to other age groups

There needs to be an acknowledgement by governments, donors and aid agencies that global poverty reduction, and the goals in relation to these, cannot be achieved without recognising older people as (a) proportionately the poorest social grouping and (b) a uniquely vulnerable and rapidly expanding group. They also cannot be achieved without changing the way data is collected on the older cohort. The failure to recognise older people, such as in the collection of data on HIV/AIDS, has enormous implications. This is not collected for people over 49 years of age, resulting in the exclusion of older people to any kind of response and directly discriminating against them (Help Age International, 2009c). The MDGs and the majority of development interventions are ‘old age-blind’. For example, MDG progress indicators are not desegregated by age group, although age-specific targets do exist:

“While the MDGs have specific targets on children and youth, they are silent on the issues of age, disability and ethnicity...If the MDGs are to deliver fair and equitable development that reaches the very poorest, they can no longer ignore the unprecedented demographic change that is presently taking place” (Help Age International, 2008).

Solutions overall have to be developed at both strategic international and national levels – Social Protection and a Convention on the Rights of Older People - as well as practically at local and programme levels. Aid agencies and governments can play key roles in making a difference to a just and equitable world which centrally includes older people.

Action points and strategic solutions

There are many action points that can be taken at a practical or programme level, within organisations, governments and communities. Some are listed below:

- ***Promote intergenerational initiatives.*** Encouraging and facilitating such initiatives promote mutual, productive exchange between generations, focussing on older people as a resource and making more visible the interdependence between generations. Such initiatives can combat prejudice, challenge ageist stereotyping and provide mutually pro-active exchanges so that wisdom gained can be transferred across generations. Intergenerational work can also bring a sense of equal value and solidarity across the generations and promote strong community and social cohesion.
- ***Review your base line and monitoring databases.*** How visible are people over the age of 60? How much are the needs and interests of older people visible in databases and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms?
- ***Review the Madrid Action Plan on Aging.*** Use the Action Points (United Nations, 2002:S11 Recommendations) to adapt and adjust policy and practice to include the visible and structured inclusion of older people
- ***Identify the tools used and needed in increasing visibility of ageing communities.*** Explore the types of tools needed, such as guidelines or age proofing mechanisms, to increase recognition of the contribution of aged people to an organisation's policy and practice. Link in with agencies experienced in working with older people, such as Help Age International, Age Action Ireland, Active Citizenship Groups in Ireland for guidance and inspiration.
- ***Recognise how ageism is at work at your agency, both organisationally and operationally.*** How much of the policies and practice in reality see older people as a 'burden' and not as a 'resource'? Consider the

language used: ‘older people’, ‘seniors’, ‘elders’ versus ‘the aged’ and any other language which has connotations of ‘the other’. Promote a development approach that is focused on active ageing, and bring positive images of active citizenship into the organisation confronting negative ageist stereotyping.

- ***Work with governments.*** Bring the social protection needs of older people centre stage in responses focused on poverty by working with agencies such as Help Age international to inform the debate on older people.
- ***Support the adoption of A Convention on the Rights of Older People.*** Link in to agencies promoting the strengthening the international mechanisms which ensure the inclusion of older people in global development.

Conclusion

Inadequate participation and visibility of older people in development policy making, and lack of structured mechanisms to allow older people to participate in development discourse will continue to slow down the building of societies which are relevant for, and inclusive of, all ages. Aid agencies and governments alike need to move beyond attitudes of older people as passive beneficiaries to seeing them as active and aware agents of change. Changing the views of older people from recipients of charity to individuals with rights, knowledge, power and expertise will increase respect for older people and will improve the relationships between generations. Discrimination against any group in society is unacceptable. As the world experiences rapid population ageing, the pressure to discriminate against older people is likely to intensify; therefore does the imperative to address such discrimination. Respecting people’s rights results in better development, since respect, dignity and representation underpin good development practice and ultimately promote strong community cohesion.

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