



Ageing Issues in Africa: A Summary



Hein Du Tlessis

HelpAge
International

Leading global action on ageing



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Introduction

It is now common knowledge that the population of older people worldwide is increasing dramatically. Whereas there were only 200 million of them in 1950, projections are that they will shoot to 2 billion by 2050. Most fascinating about that figure is that the number of older people will, for the first time in the history of mankind, be more than children under the age of 14 years. The most rapid of this increase is taking place in the developing regions with Africa alone, projected to shoot to 212 million by 2050.

This unprecedented increase is exposing many hardships being faced by older people. These include socio-economic changes, deterioration of cultural values and mores, perennial man made and natural disasters and the deadly HIV/AIDS scourge, among others. Quite startling is the fact that all these changes are finding governments, the private sector, NGOs and society in general completely unaware of them and unprepared about how to deal with them.

In this summary, we try to highlight the issues and make some suggestions on what can be done. The time to make positive steps towards addressing the problems, needs and concerns of older people is NOW.



Definitions of old age

The United Nations defines older persons as those aged 60 years and above. However, in Africa, formal retirement age ranges between 55 and 65 years. Approximately 10 per cent of the working-age population are employed in the formal sector. The definition of old age by Africa communities also differs to that in the developed countries. In many African settings the UN definition is inappropriate or irrelevant. In rural situations, where birth registration is poor or even unknown, physical features are commonly used to estimate a person's age. The colour of a person's hair, failing eyesight and diseases such as arthritis are some features used to define an older person. More complex definitions embrace a host of social and cultural issues and may include, for example, the person's seniority status within his/her community and the number of grandchildren, which he/she has.¹

The problem of the definition of old age may seem fairly obvious and unimportant but this is not so. Definition affects older peoples' access to services, and affects policy and resource allocations.

The Demographic Picture

The world population aged 60 years and above is increasing rapidly. Whereas in 1950 it was 200 million, by 1975 it had increased by 75 per cent to 350 million, and by 1999 it had shot up to nearly 600 million.² It is projected that by 2025, the world population will reach 1.2 billion and by 2050, 2 billion. At that time, it is expected that the world population of older people will for the first time in history be greater than the population of children under 14 years.

The older population of Africa, currently estimated to be slightly over 38 million, is projected to reach 212 million by 2050. Thus, Africa's older population will increase six-fold in five decades.³

Although the AIDS epidemic is projected to reduce life expectancy in affected countries, the older population of Africa will continue to grow. Over the next 30 years (2000-2030) the population of older people will more than double in many countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo (2.1 to 4.9 million), Mozambique (0.8 to 2.1 million), Cameroon (0.8 to 1.6 million), Ghana (1 to 2.8 million) and Uganda (0.8 to 1.9 million). During the same period, the proportion of older people will also rise dramatically. In South Africa, the increase will be from 7 to 11.5 per cent; in Ghana 5.1 to 9.5 per cent; Guinea 4.5 to 6.0 per cent and Sudan 3.9 to 6.4 per cent; Mozambique 3.9 to 5.7 per cent.⁴ Despite AIDS, the majority of people in Africa will thus grow older and will, in all probability, live longer than previous generations.

This increase in the number of older people provides a challenge for the continent as a whole, as well as for individual countries.

¹UN 1991

²US Bureau of the Census, 1999

³ibid

⁴US Census Bureau, International Data Base, 1999



Contribution

The majority of older people in Africa work in the informal sector and despite advancing age, they continue to work to support their families until they find it physically impossible to do so. In addition, older people support their families by caring for children, managing the home and taking part in agricultural work. Older people make valuable contributions to society as guardians of traditions and cultural values, which are passing, from generation to generation.

The Issues

Reducing vulnerability and promoting participation is not so much about creating special services for older people but rather to ensure that they have equal access to mainstream services along with other vulnerable groups.

- The economic contributions of older people are usually unpaid and unrecognised but form an indispensable part of development.
- Older people are usually thought of as economically dependent and passive. They are treated at best as irrelevant to development, and at worst as hampering the prospects of prosperity.¹
- Being able bodied has come to be equated with normality, and since older people cannot always conform to this ideal, they are viewed in negative terms ignoring the valuable contributions that do not require physical strength.
- Ignoring the needs of older people is both denying their rights and wasting the wealth of skills and experience they have.

What can be done?

Inequalities experienced in earlier life, such as access to education, employment and health, have a critical bearing on status and well being of older people. As such, there is need to:

- Tackle 'ageism' by educating, building confidence and raising awareness of older people, as well as those who work with them.
- Recognise the contributions older people make to family and society.
- Promote older people's rights for equity of services and participation in decision making.
- Support older people's physical independence, autonomy and interdependence in the family and community.

¹Ageing and Development Summary Report, HelpAge International, 1999



Education and Media

Older people should have access to appropriate educational and training programmes.¹ Unfortunately, they continue to be excluded in education, training and awareness creation programmes.

The Issues

Education systems are gatekeepers of privilege and opportunity. Reforming education to better serve poverty eradication goals is a necessary political process. The democratic participation of civil society organisations in making and implementing policies is essential.

- Poor access to education earlier in life means that high proportions of older people are illiterate and unaware of their rights.
- Older people are depicted as worthless, ugly and evil by the media.
- Limited access to information means that older people remain exploited because they are unaware of their rights.
- In cases where rights of older people are communicated, older people often remain disadvantaged because of language barriers. More often, they are unable to understand the official languages used.
- Attitudes towards older people often disadvantage them, limiting their access to education thus increasing their social and economic vulnerability.
- Older people continue to be excluded from skills development programmes.

What can be done?

Expansion of quality education services and consistent measures should be taken to reduce disparities. For these to be achieved, the following should be done:

- Create awareness among policy makers, the media and the wider community.
- The media should help to advocate the rights of older people, raise awareness of ageing issues and family obligations and change the dented image of older people.²
- Include issues relating to older people such as respect and cultural values in school curricula.
- Educate older people about their rights and how they can be addressed.
- Expand adult literacy programmes to include older people.
- Skills development programmes should target and include older people.

¹United Nations Principles for Older Persons, adopted by United Nations General Assembly on 16th December 1991 (Resolution No 46/91).

²Rights and Older People, a Paper presented at HelpAge International, Africa Regional Workshop, 11-13th September 2000.



Employment and Income Security

Older people are usually the poorest in every society. They do not have access to a regular income and the majority do not benefit from any social security provisions.

The Issues

Industrialisation, urbanisation and westernisation have caused a gradual disintegration of the extended family system rendering it ineffective in its role as a social security institution. The older people now find themselves vulnerable and without any source of social protection.

- Older people are discriminated against and denied employment opportunities once they reach retirement age and after retirement.¹
- Older people are forced to retire to create room for younger people even when they still have so much to contribute.
- Formal social security systems cover a small percentage of the population in most African countries² as most people work in sectors such as agriculture, domestic and mining.
- Most pensions are eroded by inflation leaving older people vulnerable.
- Older people are in most cases denied credit to help them invest for the future.
- Migrant and refugee older people do not have any form of social security.

What can be done?

The challenges for reforming provision of care and services to older people in developing countries are set out along with the case for a partnership based approach.³

- Broaden policies on social security to encompass the formal, traditional, informal and semi-formal employment systems to ensure that the poor, at whatever stage of development or age are captured.⁴
- Include social security systems to cover those that have been unlucky not to get employed.
- Provide better interest rates to protect pensioners from inflation.
- Stop discrimination of older people in employment.
- Give older people access to credit.
- Provide social security and protection for migrant and refugee older people.
- Older people's work schedules should be changed to suit their age.

¹ Governance of social security schemes, Pension schemes in Africa, International Social Security Association, Accra, Ghana 1999.

² The World Bank, Averting the Old Age Crisis. 1994

³ Shultz, J. Economic Security in Old Age: A Family-Government Partnership, in The Ageing and Development Report, HelpAge International.

⁴ Kaseke, E. Social security and the Elderly: The African experience, a paper presented at AGES Conference, April 1999.



Family and Care

The care of older people within their families in Africa was guaranteed until the intervention by colonial rule, modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation. Older people played important roles in the community. They had knowledge and wisdom, which made their positions in the society unquestionable.¹ The family is still the most important caring institution for older people.

The Issues

Changes in the family structure are more pronounced in the developing world. However, socio-economic changes have weakened the strength of this system to provide adequately for its older people in Africa.

- Pressure from different quarters has led to change in the family structure affecting family composition and function.
- Family bonds have been weakened by the need to ensure survival in a cash economy thus impacting negatively on older people.
- Weakening of family support structures has increased the vulnerability of older people.²
- Society's negative attitude towards older people is increasing due to associated costs of care of older people.
- HIV/AIDS impacts negatively on older people by breaking the emotional and mutual support.³
- Modernization, urbanization, and industrialization have led families to live great distances apart, communicating through modern technology, reducing opportunities to help each other meet certain needs.⁴

Because of these issues, older people's rights are neither recognised nor valued in the way in which they were previously.

What can be done?

To increase the capacity of families to provide support to older people and change negative attitudes towards older people, the following should be done:

- Assist the family so as to perform its traditional role in providing care for older people.
- Educate society to change their attitudes towards older people.
- Recognise older people's contribution and empower them to contribute to their families in economic and other terms.
- Provide tax concessions to families to ensure that they take care of older people.

¹Adjetey-Sorsey, E. The Impact of Changing Family Structures, a paper presented at HelpAge International, Africa Regional Workshop, 11-13th September 2000.

²Research for practice and development in Africa, in Southern African Journal of Gerontology 2000.

³The Elderly and the Family in Developing Countries, Occasional Papers Series, No 13 1994, United Nations.

⁴Eldemire-Shearer, D. Change, Family Life, Coping Strategies and Seniors, in The Ageing and Development Report, HelpAge International, 1999.



Health

Older people throughout Africa often cite health as a priority issue. At an individual level, the capacity to earn a living or participate in family and community life, as well as a sense of personal well-being are all governed by health status.¹

The Issues

Poor health means withdrawal of older people from productive activity and may render them dependent and disabled. Their situation worsens because of:

- Disability due to the effects of long term diseases that occurred in childhood and early adult life such as TB, rheumatic fever and other treatable infectious diseases.
- Common problems such as hypertension, stroke, diabetics, heart diseases, trachoma and blindness that often lead to complications and permanent incapacity.
- Exclusion of health of older people in the curricula of health training institutions.
- Lack of specialised geriatric services attending to the health needs of older people.
- Lack of adequate income to pay for transport, health care and drugs.
- Lack of income in the family, which pushes older people's health problems to be addressed only after other family priorities are met.
- Absence of government systems allowing older people to access free medical services.
- Very few older people are aware of fee-free exemptions and that in spite of the perceived usefulness of modern medicine many still avoid hospital care.²
- Negative attitudes of health personnel discourage them from visiting health centres.
- Exclusion of older people from primary health education systems.
- Absence of nearby health clinics means older people do not have the energy to travel nor the money to pay for transport.

Access to health services is a human rights issue. Basic needs, which include the right to food, clothing, shelter and health, are human rights. Access to health services is not a benevolent act but is basic human right for any human being regardless of age.

What can be done?

The first step is the need to recognise the right to enjoy good health as a basic human right. Governments and communities need to:

- Change prevailing negative attitudes, which discourage older people from accessing health services.
- Encourage participation of older men and women in health management teams to articulate the concerns of older people.
- Design health services that take into account the physical condition of older people.
- Draft legislation to enable older people to enjoy the health services of their country.

¹Ageing and Development Report, P.49, HelpAge International, 1999

²The Contributions of Older People to Development, The Ghana Study, HelpAge International, February 1999



Poverty

In the majority of countries worldwide, but particularly in the developing countries, older people are typically the poorest members of society and live far below the poverty line.¹ Whilst the cycle of poverty is hard to break for anyone, the challenges are even greater for older people as society ignores their needs and fails to recognise their potential so making it harder for them to change their situation.

The Issues

Distancing older people from the mainstream of their societies carries with it impacts which go beyond income and wealth into poor living.

- The most vulnerable seldom have control of community assets and in many situations older people are among the most vulnerable in society.
- In some cases, programmes designed to alleviate poverty prohibit the inclusion of poor older people, for example, credit programmes that require an initial saving may prove difficult for some older people to access.
- Low incomes make it hard for people to save for their older years. Many people enter their older years with limited assets and these are quickly exhausted as earnings reduce.
- Poverty means that older people in Africa are coping with poor health, lack of basic education, the impact of AIDS and much more. The lack of income security makes older people vulnerable and open to abuse.
- For anti-poverty programmes to succeed, all people of all ages need to benefit from strategies to reduce poverty². At present older people tend to be on the margin of such poverty alleviation strategies.
- Families are often seen as the main social security system in Africa. However, increasing poverty makes it harder for families to cope.³
- Income problems increasingly affect people as they get older. In older age there maybe a reduced ability to work – as work abilities are dependent on relatively good health.

What can be done?

Policy development must challenge and overcome the invisible barriers of age prejudice that prevent older people from playing a full and valued part in the development of their societies. These can be done through:

- Changing attitudes that prevent older people accessing services available to other population groups.
- Inclusion of older people in poverty reduction processes such as the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and program design to alleviate poverty.
- Exploring effective means of supporting family structures.

¹ILO 1997.

²UNFPA report, Copenhagen 5+

³Neysmith, S. and Edwarth, J. Dependency Theory: an alternative approach (1984), Economic Dependency in the 1980's: It's impact on the Third World Elderly. Ageing and Society, Vol 4, no 1.



Rights

Awareness of abuse, neglect and violation of the rights of older women and men have been slow to emerge throughout the world. In Africa, it is often believed that traditional family structures and norms of respect mean that all older people are well supported and that, as such, violations of their rights is not an issue. This is not the case.

The Issues

Older people are abused socially, economically and psychologically as a result of society's failure to accord them their basic human rights. Their legal and health rights are neglected and other basic human rights such as the right to life and liberty, the right to work and the right to freedom from discrimination are violated. Some examples are highlighted below:

- Older people are accused of everything from witchcraft to preventing or causing too much rain – for this they are tortured and assaulted.¹
- Rape and violence by family members towards older relatives has been found to be alarmingly common in some places.²
- Financial support is limited as lending institutions refuse credit based on a person's age and donor agencies avoid funding work with older people.³
- Age is a barrier to employment and older people are the first targets of retrenchments when Structural Adjustment Policies are introduced.
- Education and training programmes systematically exclude older people and so deny them opportunities to develop new skills that could help sustain them.
- When food is in short supply, social pressures often penalise older people in intra-household food distribution.
- Theft of property by family members is common and in many countries inheritance laws actively discriminate against older women.
- Legal systems fail to protect the rights of older people.

Protection Offered by International Instruments

There are three age-specific international instruments that should protect the rights of older people, namely, the UN Plan of Action on Ageing (1981), UN Principles for Older Persons (1991) and the UN Proclamation on Ageing (1992). At present, none of these are legally binding and so little action has been taken. There are, however, many other non age specific instruments that should ensure the protection of older people⁴ e.g. the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Africa Charter of Human and People's Rights and various International Labour Organisation Conventions. But older people remain unprotected as society fails to acknowledge their rights as human beings.

What can be done?

Attitudes that see older people as useless, worthless, spent-forces, ugly and evil need to change so that older people are no longer relegated to the bottom of social structures and treated as non-entities. Then there is need to:

- Implement the UN Principles of Older Persons.
- Recognise and address the basic rights and needs of older people.
- Include older people in all the processes that affect them and others in society.
- Develop, enact and implement legislation on older people.

¹Violations of Rights of Older Men and Women in Africa, Paper presented at the 29th ICSW International Conference on Social Welfare, October 2000, South Africa

²Mpathekombi, ya bantu abadala: elder abuse in black townships on the Cape Flats, Research by the University of Cape Town

³The Ageing and Development Report, pp 174-178, HelpAge International, 1999

⁴Human Rights and Older Persons, United Nations, October 1999



HIV/AIDS

The effects of HIV/AIDS on all sections of the society are immense. A lot has been discussed on the effects of the pandemic on the sexually active age groups. Unfortunately, very little has been done to explore its effects on older people.¹ AIDS has, and will continue to have a huge impact on older people in Africa.²

The Issues

Older people play a major role by caring for people affected by HIV/AIDS and then bringing up orphaned grand children.

- HIV/AIDS affects older people as they take care of orphans, relatives and partners who have HIV/AIDS, and as traditional birth attendants and healers.
- Older people risk being infected because they are unable to buy protective devices.
- The impact of taking care of orphans drains them emotionally.³
- Their finances are depleted since most of them have no source of income, but are required to take care of the family's health and material needs.
- The emotional impact of a changing family structure contributes to increased isolation and loneliness.
- Most programmes assume that older people are not sexually active, thus denying them AIDS education and putting them at risk.
- Older people lose their carers to AIDS.

What can be done?

As the AIDS pandemic continues to pose challenges in Africa, there is need to:

- Target AIDS education at older people.
- Provide the public with facts about the impact of AIDS on older people.
- Conduct awareness campaigns in culturally acceptable ways to older people.
- Increase attention to the effects of AIDS on older people and support the changing role of older people.
- Change AIDS policies to reflect the needs of older people.
- Conduct research to increase understanding of the impact of AIDS on older people in Africa.
- Work out coping mechanisms to help older people support their children and grandchildren.
- Avail counseling services for older people.

¹Older People and AIDS, Paper presented at the HelpAge International, Africa Regional Workshop, 11-13th September 2000, Harare Zimbabwe.

²Nhongo, T. 2000. Research for practice and development, Editorial, Southern Africa Journal of Gerontology, 9 (2): 1-5.

³ibid.



Conflict and Emergencies

Many African countries are affected by the consequences of civil war, conflict and natural disasters. Given that most conflicts are internal and undermine social structures, civilians of all ages are affected.¹ Older people's ability to cope in emergencies is hampered by the lack of understanding of their special needs by aid operations.

The Issues

Disasters make a bad situation worse. Poor and struggling before emergencies strike, older people describe their subsequent crisis as a result of their prior predicament. They talk of being invisible, excluded, marginalised and powerless.²

- Where there is mass movement of populations, housebound older people are often left behind or are unable to gain access to essential services.
- Older people's basic needs are not met in emergency situations because of the failure by emergency programmes to locate, meet and assess their needs.
- Food distribution centres are not considerate of older people's limited mobility. Food rations provided are often unsuitable for digestive and dental conditions of older people.
- Poor shelter leaves older people to sleep on cold, hard or damp surfaces leading to exacerbated health problems.
- Distance to health clinics hampers older people's ability to seek health care.
- Destruction of community health systems limits older people's access to health care
- Lack of drugs for chronic disorders such as diabetes leads to complications.
- Exclusion of older people in supplementary feeding programmes.
- Due to sudden changes resulting from bereavement and loss of support from young children, older people are traumatised and stressed.
- Responsibility of caring for younger children in the absence of younger parents falls on older people.
- Breakdown of cultural and social values result in loss of family/community support.
- Exposure to theft and physical abuse increases.

Reducing the vulnerability of older people is not primarily about creating special services for them. It is about ensuring that they have equal access to vital services.³

What can be done?

Emergency programmes need to create a system where the needs of older people can be met. There is need to:

- Involve older people through meetings and consultations.
- Ensure that older people are represented on relevant decision making and advisory bodies.
- Develop simple checklists to assess levels of isolation and vulnerability and assist in targeting resources.
- Adjust and distribute systems to ensure that older people can access emergency assistance.

¹HelpAge International, Ageing and Development Report, P9. 1999

²Older people and Humanitarian Crises: needs, roles and contributions', HelpAge International, 1999

³HelpAge International, Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: Guidelines for best practice, 1999



Gender Issues

It is generally recognized that historical and socio-cultural domination by men in most societies has continued to have an intergenerational effect on women's access to social, economic and political prosperity. For the past two decades in Africa, efforts by the UN and other civil society organisations have focused on eradicating all forms of discrimination against women. These efforts have borne some results.

Reforms in the social, political and economic sectors have however left a majority of older people more vulnerable. The rapidly falling living standards have continued to have a differential impact on older women and men.

The Issues

The majority of older persons in almost every country are women (55 per cent globally), with women: men ratios increasing with age. Policy needs to address the particular vulnerabilities that derive from women's lifetime disadvantages.

- Older women are more likely to be widowed, to live alone and in poverty.¹ This is because older men tend to marry younger women. Men are also favored by the patriarchal structures in the society, which result in a higher socio-economic status.
- In a majority of countries, problems of widowhood generally impact on older women than older men. Problems faced include being replaced by younger wives, difficulties in accessing basic needs, among others.²
- Discrimination in property and inheritance laws impact more on older women than older men.
- Witchcraft allegations tend to be targeted more at older women than men. The victims are often isolated, single, older women.³

What can be done?

The gender dimension of ageing must be a prominent feature of all agenda's for policy action to:

- Ensure older men and women are targeted in development projects.
- Change laws to protect the property rights of older women and men.
- Sensitize communities to enhance respect for older women and older men's rights.
- Develop and implement age-sensitive as well as gender-sensitive policies and strategies to ensure equal access to social and economic amenities.

¹Yvonne J. Gist and Victoria A. Velkoff 'Gender and Aging: Demographic Dimensions' International Programmes Centre, U.S Department of Commerce, 1997

²Kate Forrester Kibuga, Older People in Magu Tanzania: The Killings and Victimization of Older Women, Dar-es-salaam: HelpAge International, 1999

³Violations of Rights of Older Men and Women in Africa', Paper Presented at the 29th International Council on Social Welfare, Cape Town October 2000, HelpAge International, 2000



Housing and Living Environments

Older people require adequate shelter. However, they are often deprived of decent shelter due to socio-economic changes, superstition and belief.¹ Hardest hit are the landless urban dwellers.² Environmental changes and the development of the infrastructure do not take into account the needs of older people.

The majority of older people in Africa live in rural areas and this trend is expected to continue; by 2020 it is projected that 64 per cent of people over 60 years will be living in areas defined as rural.³

The Issues

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the right to adequate housing has been recognised as an important component of the right to an adequate standard of living.

- Older people in urban slums risk eviction because the slums are illegal settlements.
- Older people who own land on which their houses are built, live in very poor conditions because they do not have resources to improve them.⁴
- Older people own land under customary tenure, without title deeds.
- Changing family structures are more evident in urban areas impacting negatively on older people.
- Older people suffer in urban areas because their needs are excluded in infrastructure designs.⁵

What can be done?

The provision of adequate housing using locally available materials and a suitable environment for older people requires action not only by governments, but all sectors of the society.

- Consider differences between land tenure in rural and urban areas regarding access to land and services while drafting policies.
- Consider the needs of older people who may be suffering impaired mobility by implementing United Nations guidelines to enable them access all public utilities.
- Implement Habitat Agenda of the right to adequate housing⁶ and include older people.
- Provide equal access to land to older people and by provide them with title deeds.
- Promote equal access to credit for older people to enable them put up decent shelters.
- Take into account local conditions when providing shelter for older people so that the houses can be accepted.
- Create consultative mechanisms at all societal levels by including older people in the decision making process.

¹Older People in Tanzania, a research report from HelpAge International

²Body helps aged retirees to get decent shelter, 1996, Daily Nation August 13.

³Information Needs for Policy and Action on Ageing and the Aged in Africa, Workshop Proceedings, WHO/HAI, January 2000.

⁴Older People in Tanzania, a research report from HelpAge International

⁵Working with older people in urban areas, in The Urban Opportunity, 1996.

⁶The Habitat Agenda. United nations Conference on Human Settlements, 1996.



Food and Nutrition

Food is a basic human need that affects people's quality of life and their ability to contribute socially and economically to the family and community. Nutrition research and interventions have traditionally focused on the needs of the under 5's and lactating mothers. It is a fact that very little is known about the specific nutritional needs of older people in Africa.

The Issues

Malnutrition is one of the factors that contribute to poor health of older people hindering their active participation in different activities. While dealing with them, the following should be considered:

- Older people's special needs are often ignored in health and nutrition programmes.
- Older people are more susceptible to food deficiencies as a result of physiological changes such as loss of teeth, changes in taste and reduced mobility.
- Social isolation contributes to reduced food intake and increased risk of malnutrition.
- Malnutrition brings with it risks of increased mortality and morbidity. Reduced functional ability makes income generation and self care activities harder.
- In most countries in Africa, the training of nutritionists does not include the specific needs of older people.
- In times of food shortages, older people in Africa often suffer food deprivation and are discriminated against in intra-household food distribution patterns.
- Older people often have less access to food production than other groups. They are often excluded from credit and agricultural production programmes.
- Even in relatively food secure areas, high levels of malnutrition among older people has been reported.¹
- Older people are often excluded in land redistribution programmes.

What can be done?

For older people to participate actively in socio-economic activities, the following should be done:

- Implement the Vienna Nutrition Recommendations for the Plan of Action on Ageing.²
- Conduct research to increase understanding of the nutritional needs of older people in Africa.
- Provide health and dental services for older people to ensure the early detection of malnutrition and improvement of mastication.
- Include needs of older people in national nutrition policies.
- Educate the public on older people's nutrition.

¹Sophie Ochola, An Assessment of the Nutritional Status and Socio-economic Contributions of the Elderly in Nairobi and Machakos Districts, A Research Report, Nairobi: HelpAge International, 2000

²Human Rights and Older Persons, United Nations, 1999



Social Welfare

The provision of social welfare to the needy has its roots in the philanthropic approaches spearheaded by religious and related groups. Social welfare now ranges from public assistance, various forms of relief during hard times and other social assistance programmes. However, the provision of services under these schemes is covered by pieces of legislation which specify the groups to benefit, but excludes older people.

The Issues

The economic and political situation in many African countries is straining the traditional family care structure. Wars, conflicts and disasters are causing displacement, leading to separation of families and a change in power structures. Economic hardships are making it difficult for some families to provide care and support to older people. Changing cultural values and the changing relationships between state and traditional leaders is undermining traditional values of respect for older people.

- There are very few countries in Africa where older people are covered by any social welfare legislation.
- Older people are assisted by pieces of legislation borrowed from those covering other population groups.
- Many countries in Africa have adopted Structural Adjustment Programmes whose cost sharing component forces older people to pay for services which they used to receive free.¹
- Poor older people are now suffering as they struggle to pay for these services.
- Welfare systems as applied in most of Africa have ignored the traditional mechanisms, which sustained families and communities during hard times.

What can be done?

The changes in family structures, economic and political climates are impacting negatively on older people in many ways; leading to their isolation within the family and society in general.

- Consider legislation that will enable older people have access to welfare services that are sensitive to their needs.
- Consider social welfare schemes which take into account traditional schemes used in communities.
- Support and strengthen traditional schemes so that the burdens of economic upheavals do not prejudice older people.
- Strengthen the provision and access of social services by older people.
- Consider the role of older people's associations and self-help initiatives.
- Consider the contributions of older people as volunteers in community based initiatives.
- Review employment policies and social security systems to ensure contribution to welfare schemes can be made by all and that the benefits reach those who are entitled to get them.²

¹Kaseke, E. Social Security and the Elderly: The African Experience, a paper presented at AGES Conference, April 1999.

²Adjetey-Sorsey, E. The Impact of Changing Family Structures, a paper presented at HelpAge International, Africa Regional Workshop, 11-13th September 2000.



Older persons have a right to:

Independence

*The right of older persons to basic needs, work, education and training.
The right to live at home and in a safe environment.*

Participation

The right of older persons to participate in activities and in the formulation of policies that affect their well being. The right to contribute to society and form associations.

Care

The right of older persons to family care and access to health, social and legal services. The right of older people to make decisions about their care and enjoy basic human rights, respect and privacy.

Self-Fulfillment

The right of older people to fully develop their potential and to access the educational, cultural spiritual and recreational resources of society.

Dignity

The right of older people to live in dignity and security, free from exploitation and abuse. The right to fair treatment without discrimination regardless of their economic contribution.



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HelpAge International, Africa Regional Development Centre,
P O Box 14888, Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya. Tel. 254-2 446991, 444289, 449407
Fax: 254-2 441052, E-mail: helpage@net2000ke.com