

The Older Citizen's Monitoring Project in Tanzania

HelpAge International has supported groups of older people in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Jamaica, Kenya and Tanzania to monitor their governments' implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002.

This three-year grassroots monitoring project has revealed some sharp discrepancies between policy and practice, as well as generating a sense of solidarity among older people.

The groups began by analysing the local and national policy environment, and identifying key concerns. In all five countries, they chose to monitor access to health and income-security entitlements. By gathering evidence of gaps in service provision, and presenting it to local and district authorities, the groups are starting to influence budgets and government action.

Project Activities

Older people in two areas of Tanzania monitored the delivery of health services to older people in line with government commitments. The implementing partners were Arusha Retired and SAWATA (Help the Elderly). The project has had a huge impact on the lives of older people in the project areas and beyond.

HelpAge International's partner in Arusha is the Arusha Retired People's Association (CHAWAMA). Members of CHAWAMA, and local leaders at village and ward levels, were trained to act as project facilitators. They were given information on Tanzanian policies, and trained in leadership skills, lobbying and advocacy skills, and how to gather evidence on health services. These facilitators then formed older people's committees, which took part in the monitoring process.

Primary areas of concern for older people in Tanzania are the quality of health care they receive, the cost of treatment, and the distance to and from services.

One older person was told by hospital staff, "Go home. You are not ill, just old." As part of the project, older people were asked to monitor and log their experiences during every hospital visit.

The findings revealed the following:

- ▶ 40% said the tone of language used by medical staff was mocking.
- ▶ 94% were charged for the consultation.
- ▶ 30% were unaware of how to apply for free health care.
- ▶ Over one-third had to wait four to six hours to see a doctor.
- ▶ Almost half had to pay for their own fare to get to the hospital.

Achievements

Charges for consultations and drugs at health centres have reduced dramatically. For example, between August 2004 and March 2005 in Buigiri district, the percentage of older people being charged dropped from 80% to 13% and the percentage paying for prescribed drugs has dropped from 100% to 10%.

Government officials have asked SAWATA to establish a system to "authorise" older people to be treated free of charge by doctors.

Older people's committees established through the project are discussing wider issues with the authorities, including famine, elder abuse, and school fees for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

Older people gave their input to the national poverty-reduction strategy (MKUKUTA) which, for the first time, includes a social-protection goal aimed at reducing vulnerability in old age.

All 8,000 vulnerable older people in Munduli district have been granted free health care, based on the pilot project in the Mto wa Mbu Ward. This is funded by the Community Health Fund.

In addition, the project has also given older people a sense of respect and many said that they now felt that their concerns were being listened to. They also thought that the project created support for older people at a village level and that other areas of concern could now be addressed.

The future

HelpAge International Tanzania will continue to lobby national and local government to ensure free health care for all older people. The success in Moduli district has shown the lobbying power of older people and their desire to ensure that their needs are met. The older citizens' monitoring projects have enabled older people to monitor various poverty programmes, motivating them to claim their entitlements and become involved in consultation processes.



Miriam's story

Miriam Said is 63 year-old and lives in Kikuyu North Ward in Dodoma. She stays with two children, one grand daughter and her young sister who is mentally ill. She does not have any relatives who live nearby to help her take care of her family.

She became an activist in the project after her experiences with the healthcare system.

"I had some pains in my leg after a long bus journey from Arusha to Dodoma. After I arrived in Dodoma I bought some pills at the pharmacy to stop the pain. Next day I visited at the regional hospital for a further medical check-up. The doctor prescribed me with some drugs, which the hospital did not have, so I bought them at private pharmacy. It didn't surprise me to hear that there are no medicines at the hospital.

She took the pills but the pain did not stop. "I went to Makole hospital; the doctor in charge asked me to contribute Shillings 500 for consultation. After I fulfilled the condition, the doctor gave me some drugs which, I used for 5 days but the pain did not stop. I also went to Mirembe hospital to seek further medical assistance and asked to pay once again. When I told her that I am exempted from paying for medical charges, she denied that.

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