

*These guidelines result from experiences gathered from HelpAge International's 21 years of working with and for older people in Africa. They are intended to provide guidance for those working with older people and those involved in human rights issues.*

### **Ageing in Africa**

According to UN projections (2002), the population of older people in Africa is about 42 million. This figure is expected to shoot to 205 million by 2050.

The traditions and values that used to ensure the protection of older people in Africa are under pressure due to social and economic changes. Today, they are subjected to various forms of abuse that include physical violence, rape, and denial of basic necessities (food, water, shelter and health care). They are also denied support by their families and communities. At the national level, older people are denied the opportunity to participate in issues that affect them and they are not adequately considered in national legislation. Although they are among the poorest of the poor, poverty alleviation programmes do not target them. With the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, older people are shouldering the burden of care, yet intervention programmes do not acknowledge their role.

### **A Rights-Based Approach to Work with Older People**

A rights based approach to work with older people begins with the promotion of development, with older people at the centre of the process. This approach is based on the belief that human rights, economic development and social justice are all inter-linked, and stresses the need for equality, liberty and empowerment. It places older people first and views them as key actors in their own development rather than as passive recipients of welfare. As with the UN Principles on Older Persons, the human rights based approach to development recognises the inherent dignity of older persons and considers participation as both a means and an end.

### **Underlying Principles in Addressing Older People's Rights**

- Older people should enjoy the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. These should be protected and defended.
- Older people play important roles in society; these should be recognised.
- Older people have a right to participate in development programmes.
- While working with older people, local situations such as culture, power dynamics, traditions and practices need to be understood.
- Strategic entry points and social networks within the community that are friendly to older people should be identified and utilised to raise the profile of older people's issues.
- When identifying possible stakeholders, there is need to remain neutral and ensure that nobody is marginalised due to a particular affiliation.
- The community and other stakeholders should be mobilised to advocate older people's issues.
- Older people should be involved in the design of research programmes, and findings shared with them and their communities.

### **Challenging Discrimination Against Older People**

Negative societal attitudes deny older people essential services such as health, justice and care. They are discriminated against and marginalised in their families and by society at large. The following actions are recommended:

- Older people have a right to be involved in issues affecting them.
- Older people's contributions should be valued and acknowledged.
- The views of older people should be listened to and their mental and physical limitations understood.
- The media should be sensitised to promote positive images of older people's issues.

- Older people have a right to be treated as individuals and not a homogenous group.
- Other population groups should be involved in programmes for older people and intergenerational support for older people encouraged.
- Law enforcement agents such as police officers should treat reports of abuse of older people with the seriousness given to cases reported by other age groups.

### **Meeting the Basic Needs of Older People**

Older people have basic needs such as food, shelter, health care and love that must be addressed. These are universally recognised entitlements as provided for by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. The needs of older people differ according to their local situations and also change with time. It is therefore recommended that:

- Older people, their communities and other stakeholders be involved in identifying their issues, and in the implementation and evaluation of programmes that address these.
- Older people's right to participate in and benefit from poverty reduction programmes be recognised.
- The family and other traditional support structures be strengthened to address the basic needs of older people.
- Older people are allowed to exercise their right to employment and not be discriminated against on the basis of their age.
- Meeting points be created to enable older people to socialise and find means of solving their problems.

### **Tackling the Abuse of Older People**

Working with an older person abused by a close family member is challenging and requires tact. Any measures taken should help to address the situation. In this regard:

- The role of the family in the care and support for older people should not be substituted, but measures taken to strengthen and support it.
- The community should be involved and motivated to take responsibility for the welfare of abused older people.
- Human rights awareness should be undertaken to empower older people to access their rights.
- Older people who have been abused should have access to counselling services.
- Poverty alleviation programmes should be implemented to empower older people economically.
- Older people's organisations should be empowered to intervene in cases of abuse, including removing them from abusive environments.

### **Meeting the Needs of Older People Affected by Emergencies**

Whenever emergencies occur, older people are affected most, as humanitarian programmes do not consider them a priority. In emergencies the following factors should be taken into account:

- Older people have the right to equal access to essential services and support just like other population groups.
- The location of older people in disasters should be identified through civic, religious and other community leaders.
- The vulnerability of older people should be assessed and specific actions taken to address their needs.
- Relief agencies and aid workers should be sensitised about ageing and the rights of older people.
- Older people's representatives and other community leaders should be trained so they can identify vulnerable members of society and target resources towards them.
- Older people have a right to be involved in relevant decision-making and advisory bodies such as disaster preparedness committees, support groups and emergency relief co-ordination committees.

## Addressing Property and Inheritance Issues

Legal provisions relating to property and inheritance rights in different countries impact differently on women and men. When addressing older people's rights in relation to property and inheritance, the following should be borne in mind:

- Older men and women have the right to own and inherit property and to sell or pass it on as they wish without prejudice.
- There is need to have a clear understanding of the local legal and cultural provisions that impact on the property rights of older women and men.
- Gaps and opportunities within the existing provisions should be explored to understand how best they can be utilised to promote the property rights of older people.
- The gender implications of property and inheritance laws and traditional practices should be understood and taken into account in the design of appropriate intervention strategies.
- Awareness of property and inheritance rights should be promoted among older people, their communities and other stakeholders, including local and traditional leaders and policy makers.
- Older people have a right to justice and legal advice. Programmes, such as paralegal training, should be implemented to enable them to access these rights.

## Working with Older People Affected by HIV/AIDS

Older people take on the burden of caring for their children suffering from AIDS and for their orphaned grandchildren. In order to alleviate this suffering, the following should be considered:

- Older people have a right to information about HIV/AIDS to enable them to protect themselves and those under their care.
- Older people living with HIV/AIDS have a right to treatment, care and support.

- The impact of the pandemic on older people, including its gender implications, should be assessed and documented. The evidence generated should be used to lobby policy makers and service providers to include older people in strategies to stem the spread of the pandemic.
- Programme design should build on and strengthen the coping mechanisms of older people and their communities.
- AIDS service organisations should be lobbied to mainstream ageing and acknowledge the role of older people in the fight against the disease.
- Older people caring for orphans have a right to receive financial and social support to enable them to provide adequate care, without compromising their own well-being.

## Promoting Older People's Access to Health

As people grow older, their needs for health care also increase. However, accessing services is made difficult by the distances to health centres, cost of medication and the negative attitudes of health care workers towards them. In order to promote older people's access to health care, the following should be taken into account:

- Older people have a right to health care.
- Governments should be lobbied to provide free health care for older people who are unable to afford medical treatment.
- Health care workers should be educated on ageing issues, health and nutritional needs of older people.
- Traditional health practices that benefit older people should be strengthened.
- The training curricula for health workers should include geriatric care.
- Non-governmental health care providers should be encouraged to provide health services designed to meet the needs of older people.
- To increase older people's access to health, mobile clinics should be provided.

## Advocating National Policies for Older People

In most African countries, the interests and needs of other population groups are catered for by numerous policies and legislation. Older people continue to be ignored. Invoking the law to address rights violations of older people, therefore, becomes a problem. In lobbying for the development of national policies and legislation on ageing, there is need to:

- Empower older people to advocate their rights and promote the development of appropriate policies that address their issues.
- Promote the implementation of the AU Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing.
- Mobilise vocal and assertive older people to talk about their plight to policy makers.
- Undertake research on the needs and rights of older people.
- Use evidence to lobby parliamentarians and other stakeholders to support the development and implementation of policies and legislation to meet the needs and protect the rights of older people.
- Identify sympathetic policy makers and work with them to influence their peers to incorporate older people's issues in their work.
- Mobilise communities and other stakeholders throughout Africa to create a critical mass of supporters to advocate the rights of older people and support the implementation of national policies for older persons.

HelpAge International is a global network of not-for-profit organisations established in 1983, with a mission to work with and for disadvantaged older people to achieve a lasting improvement in their lives.

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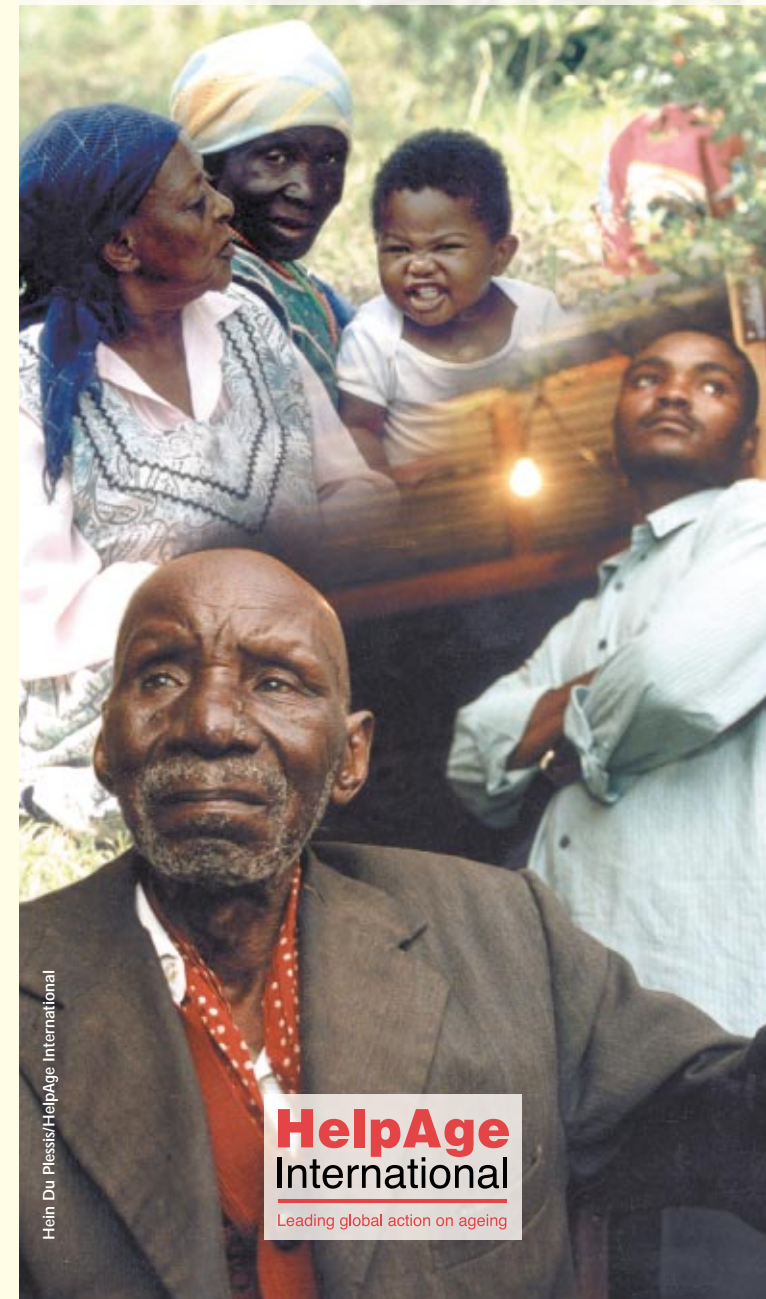
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# Addressing Older People's Rights in Africa: Good Practice Guidelines



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