

# A snapshot of older people's lives in rural Shaanxi

Promoting older people's participation in development in rural China



***Not a burden***

***but a resource***



陕西省老龄工作委员会办公室  
Shaanxi Provincial Committee on Ageing

**HelpAge  
International**

**age helps**

With thanks to the Kadoorie Charitable Foundation and the China National Committee on Ageing

# What is the situation of older people living in rural villages of Shaanxi province in China?

*“How can an old person, who is more than 70 years old and widowed, enjoy the late years of life?”*

HelpAge International and the Shaanxi Provincial Committee on Ageing recently carried out a survey in 12 villages, and here are some of the main findings:

- **Most of the older people in these villages are poor farmers.** Older people overwhelmingly identified themselves as peasant farmers (83 per cent). As farmers, most older people said their households rely first on agricultural crops for income. Although they are poor, nearly all (98 per cent) get enough to eat.
- **They have limited education and literacy skills.** Half of older people said they cannot read or write, and another 28 per cent said they can read or write only a little. Older men had an average of 5.8 years of schooling and older women 2.8 years.
- **Older women have special vulnerabilities.** Older women were twice as likely as men to be living alone, were more likely to be widowed, had half as much schooling as men on average, were more likely to be illiterate, and were less likely to travel outside the village for medical care.



- **Health is a major concern.** When asked “What is your one main concern?” older people often mentioned health issues. Common health worries are strokes and other vascular conditions, joint pains, stomach problems, and high blood pressure. Older people rely mostly on their spouse for care when sick (42 per cent), followed by their son or his wife (35 per cent).
- **Healthcare varies greatly.** When they get sick, over half of older people (55 per cent) go first to the local village doctor, while another 27 per cent go to a county or township hospital. Some 26 per cent had not visited a village doctor at all in the past year, while roughly one in five older persons said they visit a doctor at least monthly on average. Four out of five older people believe they should get healthcare more often. Asked why they did not go, the most common answers were lack of money (29 per cent), lack of information about where to go (15 per cent), and lack of motivation (11 per cent).
- **Migration of adult children is changing older people's lives.** Many children of older people have left the village in search of work. About 87 per cent of these older people have one or more children living outside the village currently. After agricultural crops, wages from migrant workers are the next most frequent source of income for older people's households.
- **Migration also brings greater responsibility for grandchildren.** Migration brings both benefits and burdens. Older people are often caring for the grandchildren left behind by migrant workers. In nearly a quarter of the households where older people and their grandchildren were living together, those grandchildren were living without either of their parents. The most common reason why the grandchildren were living without their parents was that they were working elsewhere (63 per cent).





● **Village-based older people's associations have untapped potential to address the issues of the growing number of older people in rural areas.** Most villages have a local association for older people. Of the respondents who answered about their participation in older people's association (OPA) activities, 45 per cent had not attended a single OPA-organised activity in the past year and 74 per cent had attended no more than three activities. Most OPAs are without resources to support their members. However, older people who do participate find that the OPA enriches their lives. Older people said the OPA filled the following needs in their villages:

- helps the older people whose life is in trouble to overcome their problems
- helps the village committee to solve family conflicts
- calls for respecting older people including ageing parents and grandparents
- conveys information about local services and events
- teaches the youth
- enriches cultural life in the village
- cares for older people



## About the project

HelpAge International and its partner the Shaanxi Provincial Committee on Ageing are collaborating on a project in Shaanxi Province to reduce poverty and improve health in rural China by strengthening older people's associations. The three-year project with funding from the European Union and the Kadoorie Charitable Foundation is called *Promoting Older People's Participation in Development in Rural China*.

The project aims not only to improve the existing activities of OPAs but also to help them find new ways of expanding mutual support for older people and their families in the community. For example, by linking them with local government services, the project aims to make older people's livelihoods more productive and to improve healthcare and self-awareness.

## About the survey

This is the snapshot of the project's baseline survey conducted in mid-2009 in 12 villages of Fengxiang and Hua Counties. This document is based on the findings of a sample survey of 280 older people and their families carried out by partners, as well as focus group discussions and interviews with older people, leaders of older people's associations, and local government officers working on ageing.



*"Our mind on OPAs has been quite narrow. Now we realise the OPA can do more."*

*"My son died. My granddaughter has to go to school. We don't have enough money. So I am afraid that no one will take care of me in the last years of my life."*



## Ageing in China

In 2000 older people accounted for only 10 per cent of China's total population, but that proportion will increase to 30 per cent by 2050. Despite their rising numbers, it is a mistake to characterise older people as simply a burden on China's economy and society. Older people are making important contributions to China's development and poverty reduction:

- many older people continue to work and add to their family's income
- older people enable their adult children to migrate in search of better work opportunities, often minding the grandchildren, farming the family land, and maintaining family house and assets
- older people are sustaining the informal family network and culture of mutual support, the traditional basis for social protection in China.

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