

Policy Briefing

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Older women, older farmers – the hidden face of agriculture

A significant and rising proportion of smallholder farmers across the world are now over 60 years old, and amongst these high proportions are women. These women are struggling without support or the option to retire because of urban migration, food insecurity and climate change. Many are only just surviving.

In low income countries affected by climate change and rising food prices, the ageing of agricultural workers and farmers is a trend that needs urgent action. New programmes are needed which support the vital role of older women farmers included targeted agricultural subsidies, pensions and intergenerational skill sharing.

Action taken to support older farmers, recognising the key role of older women, would have huge potential returns for us all.

Ageing farmers – women and men

The world is ageing - two billion people will be over 60 by 2050. 70% of all older people live in low or middle-income countries. There are significantly more older women than men, particularly in the 80+ age group. Greater numbers of older people live in rural areas as younger generations migrate to cities. As a result, many of those living in rural areas are older women who survive predominantly by farming.

Worldwide there are an estimated 450 million small-scale farms, supporting a population of roughly 2.2 billion people and representing 85% of the world's farms. It has long been acknowledged that farm workforces in Europe and North America are growing older; more recently countries like Japan and Korea have also seen a significant ageing of their farmers.

Despite the fact that "agriculture and global food security have more prominence on the international development agenda today than at any time in the past 30 years", there is almost no discussion among development policymakers of the age profile of farmers. Yet evidence from a number of countries in the developing world shows that farm workforces are ageing there too, and that a significant proportion of older farmers are women.

South-East Asia has seen rapid population ageing, and this appears to be especially marked in rural populations. In Thailand the reduction in agricultural employment among rural young people "has compounded the effects of rural ageing to produce rapid ageing in the agricultural workforce". The proportion of the agricultural workforce under 40 years of age fell by almost 20% between 1985 and 2003. "The proportion aged 60+ doubled, though from a low base. The agricultural workforce now has a higher median age than that of any other Thai industry". A similar pattern emerges elsewhere. Writing in the Beijing News in 2007, a Chinese academic noted "in a decade, the average age of China's population of working farmers will be over fifty, or even over sixty. As the 'grandpa farmers' and 'grandma farmers' pass away, the number of working farmers will decrease dramatically".

This demographic change is occurring in sub-Saharan Africa as well. A UN report notes that 70% of members of Mozambique's Small Farmers' Union are over the age of 45,

while the median age of members of the Zimbabwe farmers' Union is also 45, with many in their 60s and 70s. Of these a high proportion are women, who are either union members themselves or working on family farms with their husbands. A recent study from Uganda found that in the research area nearly one-quarter of households were headed by females who were mainly widows. These household heads tended to be older; many were wives who had taken over when their husbands had died.

Challenges for older women farmers

Women live longer than men as a result; older women are likely to live more years in ill-health. In many societies, being widowed or single profoundly changes older women's status in society. This can result in discrimination in both law and practice, particularly in terms of property and inheritance rights.

So while older women play a full part in agricultural production in developing countries they face many challenges. Exclusion is a common experience. In the study on extension services in northern Uganda an older woman is quoted as saying "my husband does not allow me to go for training", and the authors comment, "there exists no age differential in denying women access to agricultural extension services. This is a very bad precedent because women do the majority of farm work, and if they are not going to access extension services, the chances of reducing poverty are very minimal...". Yet where older women have the chance to benefit from extension training they are eager to take it, as an FAO report has pointed out: "some [Extension Workers] have observed that there is a certain class of people who come to meetings...mostly the elderly women and men".

Older agricultural workers who are landless are especially disadvantaged when work is scarce. Since agricultural work is seasonal, sustained employment is only possible during busy times. In slack periods older people may be overlooked in favour of younger workers. A study in Tamil Nadu, India, found that "men's capacity to secure work from farmers...worsened as they got older, leaving them increasingly reliant on their wives' agricultural labour...."

Older women – farmers and carers

Older women in Africa, affected by the high incidence of illness and death from HIV and AIDS among the so-called "working-age" generation may have to be both producers and carers. HIV deaths in sub-Saharan African countries mean that between one-third and a half of children orphaned by their parents' deaths are being cared for by grandparents, usually grandmothers. The FAO has highlighted "the growing number of elderly people and children who assume a greater role in farming and the fact that women are increasingly becoming responsible for on- and off-farm tasks previously performed by men". Earning a living from the land and caregiving is taking its toll. "Many older people are now caring for young dependants, as well as trying to manage farm production and other income-generating activities. As a result, older people in western Kenya, for instance, have reported that their harvest yields and food consumption are much lower due to conflicting priorities with their role as carers".

Older women farmers and traditional knowledge

Both older men and women have a great store of knowledge of weather and climate patterns, and what can be done to mitigate the negative impacts of both, a fact well-known to climate scientists. They also have a wealth of knowledge of traditional farming and land use. For example as long ago as the 1990s a report on Latin America noted that "older women farmers in the Quechua communities of the Andes have been found to hold specialised knowledge of plant breeding, which has been handed down and improved over generations". This knowledge store has however escaped the notice of

development agencies working on challenges arising from changing weather patterns, land degradation and related food security implications.

Supporting older women farmers

As concern growing over the sustainability of food production and distribution of food it is essential to support those producing food in the most marginal areas. Climate hazards, environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources and growing market demand have resulted in significant price shocks. There are also growing calls for fairer food distribution, recognising that hunger is still with us because of poverty, not lack of food. Older people themselves are also starting to take action. In 2011 as part of HelpAge International's Age Demands Action Campaign in 60 countries, older farmers in Sierra Leone lobbied their government to extend the retirement age and provide subsidised agricultural inputs such as fertilizer and seeds for older farmers and agricultural workers. While in Mozambique older campaigners met with the Prime Minister to call for a 27 per cent increase in the food subsidy for poorer older people.

Older farmers, both women and men, have much to offer. They have knowledge and experience of farming techniques that can increase production and reduce waste while minimising environmental damage. Their years of knowledge of weather patterns can make a huge contribution to action to mitigate the impacts of changing, less predictable climate. Their substantial contributions to poor households, as caregivers and producers, need to be recognised.

Initiatives such as the Hunger Safety Net Project (HSNP), a joint Government of Kenya/UK DFID initiative that seeks to reduce extreme poverty in Kenya and support the establishment of a government-led national social protection system are producing results. Regular, predictable, guaranteed cash transfers to older farmers reduce food insecurity, protect assets and reduce the impact of shocks such as drought on poor households. Although the transfer is relatively small – around \$30 every two months - recipients such as Haduma, an older women, are enthusiastic about the project. "This is a great idea", she said, "We never expected that something like this could happen. It will help me buy food and clothes and even restock."

Haduma is lucky; her sub-location in rural Marsabit had been selected for the pension component of the pilot programme and, as an older woman, she was eligible to register. As she has no identification to prove her age another form of verification was needed. Haduma's membership of the 'Ilabalis' age-set – a group of people who were circumcised at the same time – was recognized as sufficient proof of her age and she was confirmed as eligible for registration. Over the next few years the HSNP will deliver regular cash transfers to 60,000 vulnerable households across northern Kenya.

More action is needed to support this forgotten workforce, and HelpAge is calling for:

inclusion of older women and men in agricultural extension programmes which recognise and work with their substantial knowledge and experience

credit and agricultural input schemes to be made much more age-inclusive

a basic income in the form of pensions for all older agricultural workers

the development of programmes to capture the knowledge and experience of older farmers, women and men, of conservation farming techniques and weather patterns.

Action to support older women and men in continuing their traditional livelihoods and sharing their knowledge would make a significant contribution to a sustainable future for us all.