This rapid demographic change presents great challenges to eradicating poverty in the poorest countries and achieving sustainable, resilient economies, societies and environments. Many older people are among the poorest, often living in the most ecologically depleted and environmentally risky areas with young dependents. They struggle to secure their livelihoods and live in dignity. They are exposed to greater risks and insecurity during humanitarian challenges, without adequate mechanisms to protect their rights and support their specific needs.

Despite their poverty and marginalisation, older people are not passive and dependent. They support their families and communities as leaders, consumers, workers, farmers, educators, business people, health providers and environmental knowledge holders. Increasing numbers of older people are becoming heads of households and primary carers for ill family members and children whose parents are absent as a result of HIV and AIDS or migration. Older people also contribute to rural development; in a number of countries, farm workforces are growing older, with increasing proportions of smallholders aged 50 and over.

Ageing is happening in all countries and must be embraced as an opportunity rather than seen as a problem. Sustainable development requires the engagement of the world's older population. Failure to acknowledge the implications and opportunities of demographic ageing in the outcomes of Rio+20 and in the post-2015 process will undermine its success.

Impact and contributions to global challenges

Many older people are socially and economically active, but are often excluded from debates on sustainable development. Data on the impact of climate and environmental change on older people is in its infancy. There is an urgency to acquire data and understanding on older people to enable their inclusion and contributions to a sustainable future of benefit to all generations.

During the preparations for Rio+20, HelpAge identified a number of emerging challenges to be tackled and where there must be greater focus on older people's rights, needs and contributions.[5]

Displacement and migration

Climate change, environmental degradation and conflict increase the likelihood of emergencies. Older people are likely to be disproportionately impacted due to their vulnerability and forcible displacement. A recent report by HelpAge and The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre showed that older people form a significant proportion of internally displaced persons and refugee groups – as high as 30-65 per cent may be aged over 60.[6]

Many older people are also left behind or are unable to return when communities are displaced, and they face living in inhospitable environments often without any protection. UNHCR statistics show that during the drought in the Horn of Africa in 2011, only a small percentage of older people were found to have fled to Kenya and Ethiopia from Somalia, suggesting that older people were left behind during the crisis.[7]

In displacement contexts, many working-age adults are migrating to cities to look for economic opportunities. Children who are left behind by their parents are being cared for by older people, and this has a social and economic impact on households. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, where an increasing number of multigenerational households are headed by older people, extreme vulnerability to poverty and exclusion were found among older people and children left under their care.[8]

Food and water security

As a result of changing climatic conditions and poor water management, many older people are living in areas with water shortages, affecting their ability to produce food. Water shortages and insufficient support to older people for water management make it difficult for them to grow crops to feed themselves and their families. Older women in particular may become victims of land-grabbing, as the need for farmland becomes acute. Water shortages also mean that older people may have to walk long distances and carry heavy water containers – or pay for water, which can account for as much as thirty per cent of their income from farming or pensions.

In places where water is scarce, agriculture becomes more difficult. This affects the income, livelihood and food security of many older people and their families. Younger generations seek non-agricultural employment in cities, leaving behind older people in rural areas. Hunger is on the increase in communities of older people left behind due to drought. Farming is made complex due to climate variations which affects the timing and reliability of crop cycles.[9] Older farmers do not get sufficient policy and programme attention in this area, but an increasing proportion of smallholder farmers are now over 60 years old, including high proportions of women. Older women farmers, especially, are both farming and caring for young children. They often face discrimination in many societies, for example in inheritance and property rights.

Farmers comprise one-third of the world's population and one-half of its poor. They are "primary managers" of our ecosystem, and are hence best suited to securing sustainable development.[10] Older farmers often have knowledge of weather and climate patterns, farming techniques and land use that can potentially help mitigate the negative impacts of climate and environmental change. This can be utilised along with new technologies to promote sustainable farming practices. Agriculture requires a regeneration with support of older people to make it an innovative economic sector that attracts younger people and encourages investment.

Natural disasters and climate change

Disasters caused by natural hazards uproot millions of people each year; the frequency and magnitude of disasters will be exacerbated by climate change.[11] In 2000, UNHCR's policy on refugees noted that older refugees can be as much as 30 per cent of affected groups.[12] In 2010, 42.3 million people were displaced from rapid-onset disasters, including 38.3 million displaced by weather-related events.[13] The impacts of natural disasters are great, particularly to the growing numbers of older people in poor countries. It is a major concern that responses to older people's needs in emergencies are weak. For example, many displaced older people are excluded in food distribution and other services in displacement camps. This exclusion is evident in a survey in three refugee camps in Dadaab, Kenya, where older people were found to be in need of some form of nutritional support.[14] Aid is often not targeted to older people's needs in emergencies. An analysis of the Consolidated Appeals Process and Flash Appeals in 2010 and 2011 found that only 1 per cent of humanitarian aid was allocated to older people.[15]

But while older people are extremely vulnerable to shocks and stresses, they have invaluable knowledge, experience and skills to contribute to building resilience within their communities. Older people's knowledge of previous disaster events on a local level are central to developing good disaster risk reduction and climate risk management initiatives. In India for example, older people who use their local knowledge on crop protection methods are helping farmers cope with drought.[16]

Health

Significant improvements in global health in the last century have resulted in people living longer and healthier lives. However, for the growing numbers of older people, especially in poor countries, proper nutrition and susceptibility to infectious disease and chronic conditions or non-communicable diseases (NCDs) continue to impact on their economic, health and emotional wellbeing, and on their enabling roles.

NCDs are on the rise in developing countries, and their prevalence will grow substantially as populations age across the world in the coming decades. Already, four-fifths of deaths from NCDs are in developing countries, and older people are particularly at risk. The burden of diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, stroke, cancers and dementia are particularly borne by older people. In Moldova, for instance, HelpAge research in 2009 showed that approximately 90 per cent of older people suffer from one NCD and 40 per cent suffer from more than one.[17] Global ageing is recognised by the World Health Organization as the first of four drivers of NCDs in developing countries. Stronger financial and programmatic commitments are needed to support prevention, diagnosis, management and proper care of NCDs over the lifecourse.

Not only are growing numbers of older people living with HIV, but older people are increasingly becoming primary carers of adult children living with HIV and children orphaned as a result of AIDS. Approximately 3 million people aged 50 and over are estimated to be living with HIV in

Sub Saharan Africa,[18] and 40 to 60 per cent of children are cared for by their grandparents.[19] But older people receive little or no financial and psychosocial support for themselves and for the needs of growing children. They face increasing difficulties including declining health, reducing their ability to earn a living to support themselves and their families.

Energy and financial crisis

The world is facing a financial and energy crisis that may continue as we move into a post-peak oil world. In developing countries, older people are among the "energy poor" due to their low income and increased need for fuel. Lack of access to fuel for heating, cooking and lighting compromises their health, safety and wellbeing. It is estimated that 1.5 billion people are living in energy poverty,[20] and as fuel prices increase, the poorest and most marginalised are and will continue to be hardest hit.

The financial crisis is expected to increase the numbers of the working poor, which includes an increasing number of older people. These older people often have no choice but to work into old age.[21] They are self-employed in informal enterprises or in low low-paid employment in jobs without secure contracts, worker benefits, or social protection.[22] With a growing older population, the informal sector will continue to grow. In some countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector accounts for a substantial proportion of total employment[23] and is generally higher for women.

Regular income and access to health to protect older people and create opportunity

Social protection

Social protection is likely to be a core response to supporting the poorest and most vulnerable in the context of climate risks. Cash transfers (such as old age and disability pensions and family benefits) offer particular advantages for long-term adaptive capacity compared with specific adaptation instruments. First and foremost, they support people to meet their basic needs, without which few will be able to even think about climate adaptation. Although evidence of direct impacts of cash transfers on climate adaptation is limited, they have proven to impact on a variety of vulnerability and resilience indicators, including education, nutrition, income, livelihood and food security.

The regularity of cash transfers is also likely to be important to help people cope with climate shocks and avoid resorting to damaging coping strategies. Meanwhile, income from cash transfers may well support innovation, for example, experimenting with new crops or searching for a job.[24]

The mix of social protection instruments will depend from country to country, but they would not need to be specifically targeted at climate risks to be effective. There are growing calls for countries to extend "social protection floors" that guarantee access to essential services and income security across the life course. The concept – which has gained broad UN support and was recently endorsed as a new International Labour Organization (ILO) labour standard – is based on the positive experiences of countries as varied as Brazil, Nepal, South Africa and Thailand that have taken major steps to extend social protection.

While the concept encompasses wider economic and social vulnerabilities, the extension of social protection floors would undoubtedly provide a robust foundation for climate adaptation. Countries with floors in place would also be better placed to respond to climate shocks through existing instruments. This approach has already been demonstrated in the way cash transfer programmes were extended in countries such as Thailand, Mexico and Brazil as a response to the financial crisis. Setting up instruments when a crisis hits would be far more challenging.

The specific vulnerabilities faced by older people – especially in the context of climate risks – mean that pensions should be an important component of a floor. For developing countries, social (or non-contributory) pensions are a particularly relevant approach to extending coverage to the poorest older people. Over one hundred countries already have social pensions and there

is strong evidence of their positive impact on older people, their families and wider communities. The cost of social pensions is also modest relative to their potential impacts, for example, most African countries could afford a basic universal pension for everyone over 60 for less than 1 per cent of GDP.[25]

Investing in health systems

Primary health care system reforms would positively impact on older people, who often have specific health and care needs and are not able to afford to pay for better health. Governments need to support investment in age-friendly health care, as recommended by the World Health Organization. Health facilities, especially in rural areas, need to be made more accessible to older people. Short-term and lower-cost investments include training of health workers to address issues such as NCDs and other age-related illnesses, provision of appropriate and accessible information about health and services, and building links between formal healthcare providers and informal community and traditional health systems, are some feasible reforms.

Care should be brought to the community or provided in community when appropriate. Services such as home care keep people at home or with family instead of institutionalising them in hospitals. User fees are a major barrier to health care access for older people and new health financing schemes should be developed that take account the needs of older people. Finally older people's healthcare needs and access to services should be integrated into humanitarian responses to emergencies.

Recommendations

Growing numbers of older people are both affected by environmental change and are potentially key contributors to sustainability. It is therefore critical that global ageing and the rights and contributions of growing numbers of older women and men are not ignored in the outcomes of the Rio+20 Summit and in the post-2015 development framework. The sustainable development and post-2015 framework must therefore develop and roll out an accountable, rights-based and age-inclusive policy framework that supports people throughout the life course, and across social, economic and environmental domains.

In particular, the following recommendations are made:

- Inclusion of a focus on older people in the outcomes of the three priority pillars of the Rio Summit 2012, recognising that older people are both affected by environmental change and are key contributors to global sustainability.
- An international post-2015 framework for sustainable development which ensures that action on ageing is mainstreamed and outcomes monitored.
- Inclusion of the voices and experiences of older women and men, enabling their local ecological knowledge and experience to be included in consultations and planning on environmental sustainability, resilience building, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.
- Action to support older farmers and to address the food security challenges posed by the ageing of farm workforces worldwide and of environmental change.
- Action by the humanitarian community to address the invisibility of older people in humanitarian crises, ensuring that their specific vulnerabilities and needs are met.
- Action by the international community to ensure adequate provision and protection of older people and their assets where migration and displacement leave older people behind, often caring for grandchildren, or when they relocate to new and unfamiliar environments.
- The mainstreaming of age-inclusive measures into all government and civil society health programmes to address the associated health risks with an ageing population, environmental hazard and climate change, including integration of action on NCDs across the life course.
- Environmentally sound national energy strategies which recognise and address the energy and fuel poverty of vulnerable groups including older people.

- Full implementation of the Social Protection Floor Initiative in the post-2015 framework, ensuring that mechanisms such as social pensions are fully utilised to address vulnerability and enhance resilience to current and emerging risks.
- The use of existing and development of new age-inclusive data sets to measure poverty and vulnerability to hazard, inequality, capability and wellbeing across the life course at national and international levels.

This policy brief is drawn from the HelpAge Discussion Paper, Rio+20: The emerging challenges of an ageing world, available at: www.helpage.org/download/4fd5db3ccbb7d

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Notes

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