

# Assessment Report: The Vulnerability of Older Persons in Post-conflict Osh, Kyrgyz Republic



## Executive summary

This report discusses the findings of a survey which was organized by HelpAge International with the intention of evaluating both the social situation and the requirements of vulnerable older people in a post conflict environment. The survey was undertaken in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, following the violent events of June 2010 in south of the country. It was conducted by Luch Lotosa, a local NGO, and the results were evaluated by HelpAge staff. The purpose of the survey and this resulting report was to assess the nature of the specific challenges of vulnerable older people in Osh today in order to inspire action on their behalf on the part of HelpAge's emergency team as well as all other organizations working in the area. The results of the survey suggest a myriad of problems including those of emotional, social and subsistence nature. However, the greatest challenges older people in Osh appear to be facing are economic. According to this survey, the economic constraints people are facing are significant enough to have a major detrimental impact on the ability of many of the most vulnerable to feed and clothe both themselves and their dependents. The scale of the problems reported in the survey appears rather large; however, it is the prognosis for the future which holds the most concern. Winter is coming soon and it is clear from this survey that many of the region's most vulnerable will be facing the cold without adequate shelter, clothing or medical supplies and worse, with empty wallets, empty cupboards and empty bellies.

Written by David MacDonald

Front and back cover photos by Dalton Bennett/independent journalist

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## **1. Introduction:**

The civil conflict which erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan and especially Osh city during June 2010 has had a profound impact on the lives of everyone in the area. During these events more than 300 people were killed, more than two thousand homes were burned and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced<sup>1</sup>. Since order was restored, gradual progress towards normalization has been noted. However, the fear remains that this progress is not uniform and that significant sectors of society may be left behind. Of particular interest for this report is the challenges faced by older persons. Along with children and the disabled, older people are among the most vulnerable in any society and therefore both during violent conflict and afterwards when the pieces are being picked up, their protection deserves special attention. Unfortunately, the reality is that many crisis response organizations fail to recognize this or neglect to act upon it.

In an effort to address the immediate needs of older people in Osh, HelpAge International has developed and is now in the process of implementing a short term project entitled: “Enhancing Protection Response to Address and Include the Specific Needs of Older People Affected by Conflict.” It was determined that one of the first steps towards achieving the goals of this project must be a general assessment of the present situation faced by the project’s target group. The question was posed: What are the specific challenges faced by vulnerable older people in Osh today and how can they be addressed? Keeping this purpose in mind, HelpAge in cooperation with the Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia developed a survey to be conducted in Osh with the purpose of assessing the nature of the vulnerability of older people in the post conflict arena. The survey which was eventually undertaken took the form of a detailed questionnaire and was conducted by one of HelpAge’s partner organizations, Luch Lotosa, a local NGO which targets the needs of people with disabilities. Our analysis of the survey findings is contained herein.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Revised Flash Appeal (July 2010), 7.  
<[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2010.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/VVOS-87MPDL-full\\_report.pdf/\\$File/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2010.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/VVOS-87MPDL-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf)>

## 2. Methodology:

In its 1999 report on assistance for older refugees the UNHCR determined that “while the elderly clearly have special problems there is little to be gained from establishing yet another separate refugee category [for them.] What is clearly required, however, is a more targeted inclusion of the elderly in all aspects of programme planning and implementation, with the aim of helping young elderly to be more self-supporting and promoting better community care initiatives for the very old.”<sup>2</sup> With these remarks they identified the nature of the plight of older people. All older people are in need of support in times of conflict; however, some are especially vulnerable. Addressing the needs of older people requires a targeted approach which can react to the varied needs of this oft forgotten social group.

With this in mind, rather than simply surveying a random sample of older people it was decided that the questionnaire should be distributed to those of them who were deemed most vulnerable, in order to pinpoint the specific challenges they are facing. To achieve this goal, the selection criteria were designed to target both the very old and those who have the extra burden of supporting young or displaced friends and relatives. The questionnaire was distributed to 562 individuals and the criteria for inclusion in the survey were:

- 1.) Respondents must be residents of a district of the greater Osh city area which was directly affected by the events of June: Cheremushki, Furkhad, and Shaitepa quarters in Osh proper as well as the nearby rayons (suburbs) of Ozgor, Toloikan, Kenesh, Japalak and Shark.
- 2.) Respondents must be the head of their household;
- 3.) Respondents must be either over seventy years of age or over fifty-five years of age and either hosting internally displaced persons (IDPs) in their home or caring for those of their grandchildren whose parents live elsewhere (migrant workers);

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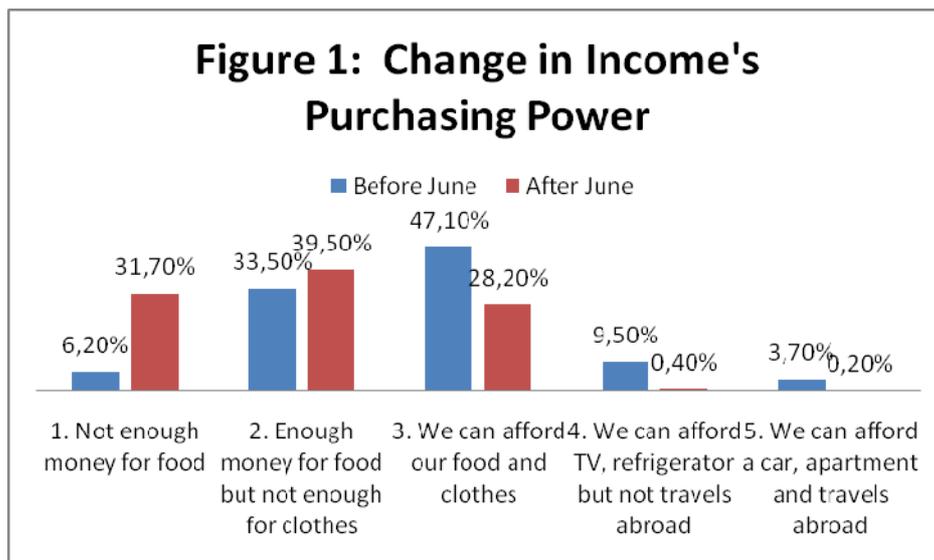
<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *UNHCR Evaluation Reports: assistance to older refugees*. (Geneva: UHNCR, 1999). <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3ae6bd450&query=assistance%20to%20older%20refugees>>

4.) Finally, those conducting the survey were asked to ensure that 50 per cent of respondents were ethnically Uzbek.

### 3. Analysis:

The ability of those caught up in tragic events, such as those in Osh, to recover from the experience depends on a variety of factors including but not limited to health status, economic constraints and social isolation. Due to their age, older people are often vulnerable to the effects of all three of these factors and analysis of the data collected via this assessment survey has shown that this is the case in Osh today.

To begin, 37 per cent of respondents reported that they simply do not have any money. While this may simply demonstrate that people and especially vulnerable older people in Osh are poor; what is of greater interest is that a significant drop in average income following the events was also reported. This result is defined by our five point purchasing power scale upon which respondents reported a drastic decrease when asked to compare their income before and after the outbreak of violence (fig 1.). In fact, more than 30 per cent of respondents reported a change in their purchasing power which has resulted in them no longer being able to afford both their food and clothes, raising the total of respondents in this category to a striking 71per cent (fig 2.)



<b>Figure 2</b>	Before June	After June
Median	3	2
Mode	3	2
% Who cannot afford both food and clothes	39.7%	71.2%

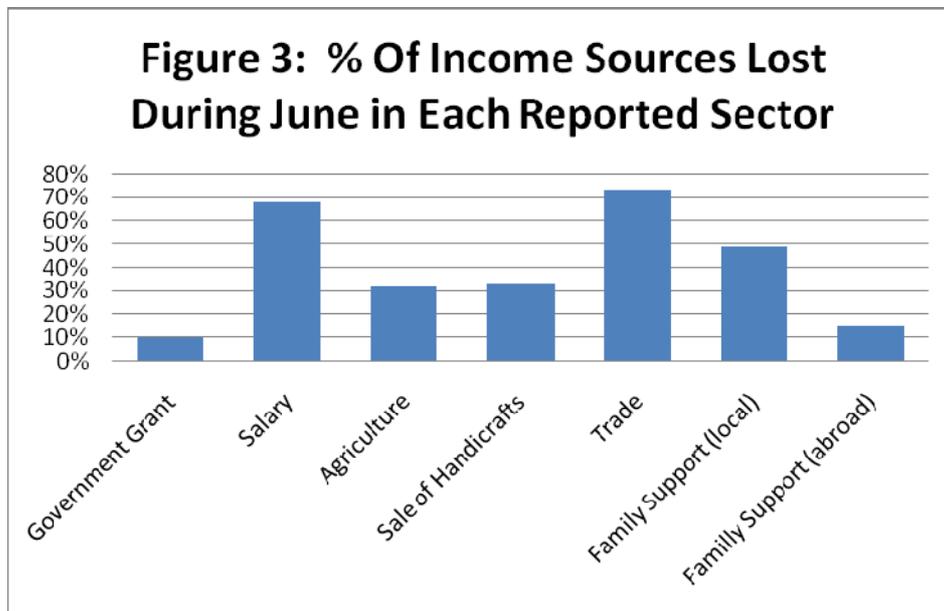
### 3.1 Income:

Focusing on the issue of economic constraints; a more in-depth analysis of the specific sectors in which people reported a loss of income proved to be equally revealing. To offer some notable statistics (fig. 3):

- 1.) More than 10per cent of those who had received government grants prior to the events report that they no longer do. This seems rather significant when we are speaking of a sample largely made up of pensioners.
- 2.) Almost half of the 176 people who reported local family support as an income source, report having lost it.
- 3.) 73per cent (29 of 40) of the people who reported trade as an income source, report no longer being in business.
- 4.) 68 per cent (21 of 31) of those who reported having a salaried position prior to June, report having lost their jobs.

The drastic income losses across these sectors can be attributed to a variety of causes depending on the nature of income. Some examples of those that were raised are: previous employers closed their businesses in Osh, premises of family businesses were destroyed and necessary agricultural supplies (fertilizers) were stolen. Addressing the specific challenges of individuals is not the goal of this report; however, what is clear from the survey and these specific reports is that the events of June have dealt a major blow to the income and therefore independence of previously economically active older people in Osh. While simultaneously, either directly or indirectly, the events had a significant detrimental impact on the level of support older people in Osh are receiving from both the government

and their families. Economically vulnerable to begin with, many older people in Osh are now facing a dire financial situation.



While this goes to show that the events of June had a significant effect on people’s ability to support themselves, the question remains: What does this translate into in terms of specific problems for older men and women and how can those problems be addressed? In order to proceed, the extent of some specific challenges must be evaluated.

Regarding specific necessities for social security, respondents reported a lacking or complete inability to procure: Food (46 per cent), Hygiene Products (40 per cent), Medicine (35 per cent) and Medical Help (25 per cent). In the case of all these indicators, the two main explanatory factors given were a lack of money and/or a general shortage of the product. What must be taken away from this data is that respondents are extremely short on cash, that the average respondent’s ability to acquire cash has been significantly impacted and that those who are able to get their hands on cash are unable to find what they need in their local markets. Considering the significance of these items for one’s health and security, the importance of resolving these concerns ought to be clear.

### **3.2 Medical:**

Medical conditions are one of the primary sources of the vulnerability of older people around the world and vulnerability of this nature is often exacerbated by political or natural crises. Therefore, ensuring access to treatment for those who require it must be a primary concern for those working to protect older people during and after emergencies. The results of the assessment survey support the need to address this issue. As mentioned above, 25 per cent of respondents reported a lack of medical access and 35 per cent - a lack of medical supplies. It is clear that action should be taken to improve the access vulnerable older people have to both medical help and medical supplies in Osh. By far the dominant explanation reported for either shortage is a lack of money and in the case of medical supplies that was the only explanation of significance. In and of itself this is not surprising. In Kyrgyzstan, as in many other developing countries, endemic poverty has resulted in many medical services and supplies being simply too expensive for even the average citizen. However, in the present context of shortage, instability and fear, leaving vulnerable people without much needed medical support risks them being driven towards the brink of their existence.

When speaking of the medical requirements of vulnerable older people in Osh the focus is not the traditional ailments inherent to conflict zones but rather the fallout, the indirect effects of the events of June and their after-effects for those with chronic conditions. The potential deterioration of the health of vulnerable people has two obvious aspects, medical requirements and nutritional requirements.

When respondents were asked what if any conditions they suffered from and what if any medicine they required, blood pressure (nearly 50 per cent of respondents) and cardiac issues topped both lists with other chronic conditions not far behind. During the best of times the cost of these medicines is a burden on the resources of poor people around the world and in the worst of times they may be forced to go without. Furthermore, the stressful living conditions inherent to the post conflict environment can exacerbate many medical conditions increasing both people's vulnerability and their pharmaceutical requirements. This is a problem which often passes under the radar as the effects of limited access to medication for chronic conditions may not be noticed until a month or three after the fact. In

Osh today people are very short on resources, stress levels are certainly high and as the survey results report vulnerable people are struggling to cope with their medical needs.

Poor diet and nutrition have been directly linked to a wide range of later-life illnesses including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis, stroke and different forms of cancer. Something relief agencies have commonly failed to consider.<sup>3</sup> As noted earlier, 46 per cent of the survey respondents reported a partial or complete inability to procure food which will obviously have a significant effect on their diet and therefore their health. Moreover, due to the regional trend of working age people migrating in search of employment, many older people in Osh have had young children left in their care and the inability of these people to procure food is sure to have an impact on the children's nutrition as well as their own.

### **3.3 Emotional:**

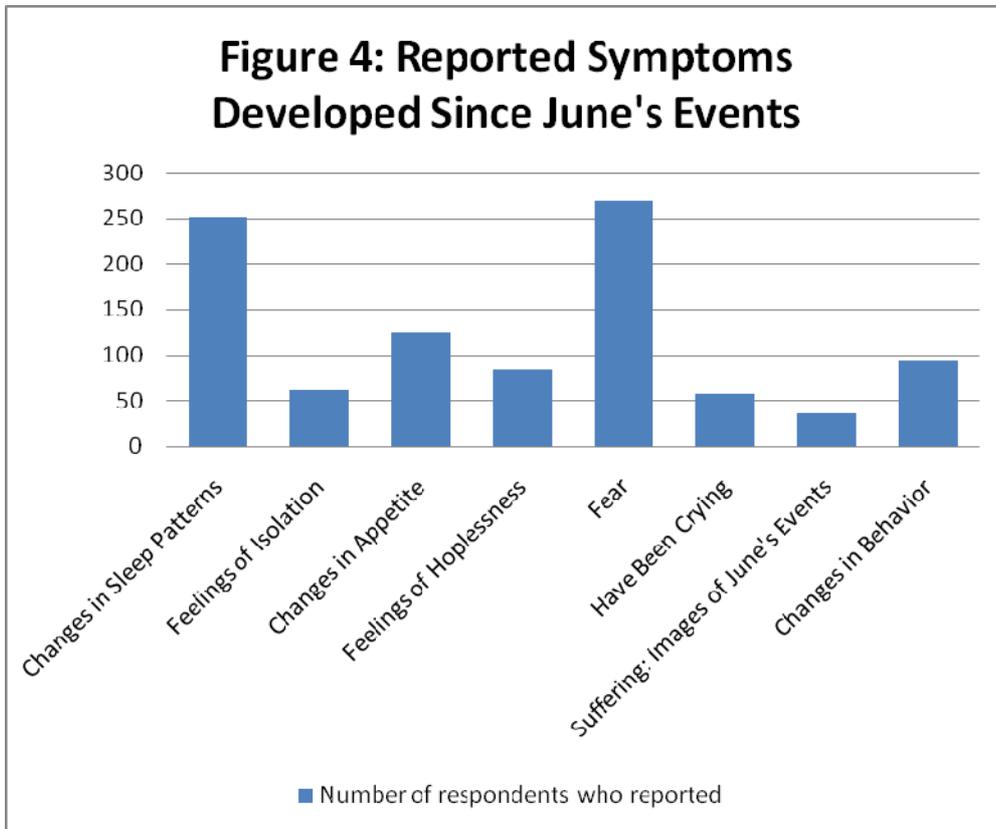
Beyond the basic necessities of sustenance and health, the emotional wellbeing of older people in Osh must be considered. In its 2003 report on ageing and health in the developing world the WHO reported, “[h]ealth is defined not only by an absence of disease or infirmity, but also by a capacity to cope with life challenges and to maintain one’s physical, mental and social well being.”<sup>4</sup> Lack of mobility, frailty and isolation make older people especially vulnerable to psychological conditions. Moreover, the fear, mistrust and defensive social structures that are inherent to the post conflict climate can transform otherwise manageable levels of emotional isolation into serious issues for those affected. When asked if they have developed new symptoms of isolation and/or depression since the June events, survey respondents provided a significant reply. Roughly 50 per cent of respondents reported developing feelings of fear and a similar ratio reported changes in sleeping patterns. Simultaneously, around 20 per cent reported changes in appetite, and similar numbers responded to both changes in behavior and feelings of hopelessness (fig.4). When considering the significance of these statistics it is necessary to take into account the future implications this emotional strain may have on those affected. Prolonged depression,

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<sup>3</sup> David Hutton, *Older People in Emergencies Considerations for Action and Policy Development*, (France: WHO, 2008), 8.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific Region, *Ageing and Health: A Health Promotion Approach for Developing Countries*, (Manila: WHO, 2003).

growing self-imposed isolation and lowered self-esteem are the likely product, and do not bode well for the future.



### 3.4 Information access:

A further problem related to isolation regards access to information. When asked whether they have access to information about available services, survey respondents resoundingly replied no (84 per cent). The two most common explanations for this were that they cannot understand the information and that no one visits them. It seems the root cause of their lack of information is isolation. This trend came through again when respondents were asked about changes in the amount of TV they have been watching since June as well as the degree to which they participate in social events. Regarding TV watching, 35 per cent of respondents reported watching more TV than they had before June. Jamilla Maturaimova, a ninety year old resident of Osh explained that for her this resulted from the combination of being housebound due to fear of going out with an increased desire to know what was happening and thereby address her fears. Regarding participation in social events 30 per cent of survey respondents reported attending fewer events while 24 per cent reported

attending more. This suggests a similar dilemma as the one suggested by Ms. Maturaimova, people have a strong desire to be informed about what is happening in their area but at the same time they fear going out to find out about it for themselves. Advocacy for and communication about safe local social events might encourage these vulnerable people to rejoin community life and thereby improve their access to information through communication with society as a whole.

### **3.5 Documents:**

One of the major initiatives planned for the project “Enhancing Protection Response to Address and Include the Specific Needs of Older People” is to ensure affected people possess the documents they require in order to access social protection mechanisms. Within our survey sample this was not reported as a statistically significant issue. Only 4.6 per cent of respondents reported having no documents. However, our survey did not specifically target those whose homes were burned so this result is not entirely surprising. Furthermore, considering the direct impact that access to social services can have on the lives of vulnerable people the importance of enabling them to secure the documents necessary for such access cannot be questioned.

### **3.6 School Attendance:**

Recently, concern was expressed that people in Osh were reporting that they would not send their children to school when it resumed in the fall due to concerns for their safety. Amongst our respondents less than 2 per cent of those caring for school age children report that they will not attend school. Apparently this is not as great a concern as was feared and hopefully continued progress towards normality will encourage the remainder to return their children to school.

### **3.7 Ethnic/Gender Breakdown:**

The conflict in June centered upon differences between the region’s two largest ethnic groups: Kyrgyz and Uzbek. Given this, comparison of the present state of vulnerable Uzbeks and Kyrgyz older people was deemed necessary. What the survey results suggest is that there is not a great deal of difference in the post conflict experience across ethnicities.

The reported isolation/depression symptoms, including feelings of fear, were all more or less equally distributed between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, as were access to food and medical help. However, the same cannot be said for income. As mentioned earlier, amongst the entire survey sample 37 per cent of respondents reported they did not have access to money but once this finding was separated by ethnicity it was revealed that only 20 per cent of Kyrgyz respondents reported having no money while amongst Uzbek respondents the total was 55 per cent. As for the ability to procure medical supplies, it was entirely correlated with income so it is not surprising that the results were similar with 23% of Kyrgyz and 53% of Uzbeks reporting an inability to procure them.

Regarding gender there is not a lot to be said. The problems reported seem to be more or less evenly distributed. The one possible exception is that women were slightly more likely to report isolation/depression symptoms across the board than men were. However, the difference is not large and while it may be evidence that they are suffering more, it could equally reflect upon their willingness to openly acknowledge their state of mind especially to questions like: “Have you been crying?”

#### **4. Concluding Remarks:**

The results of this survey demonstrate that many inherently vulnerable older people in Osh are presently trapped in a potentially vicious circle. The direct economic effects of the events of June combined with fear and self-imposed isolation has resulted in a major loss of income and social connections for many people. In turn, this loss of income and social support has put massive pressure on their already meagre resources resulting in major restrictions on their ability to procure necessary food, medicine and household products. This lack of food will likely lead to poor nutrition which, combined with lack of appropriate medicine, has dire implications for people’s health especially with winter coming. In turn, the capacity of these vulnerable people to maintain their health will likely be reflected in their ability to re-establish their relationship networks and self-sufficiency.<sup>5</sup>

Before progress is possible, the plight of older people, and especially the most vulnerable among them, needs to be recognized by all organizations working to improve the

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<sup>5</sup> Hutton. *Older People in Emergencies*, 4.

present situation in the area of Osh. With that established it will be possible to move ahead with attempting to address some of their most pressing concerns. The first thing that must be recognized is the interconnected relationship between most of the problems vulnerable people face. The standout problem is economic; however, even modest improvements to people's access to any of food, clothing, medical services or medical supplies will ease the economic pressure they are presently facing, improve their immediate prospects and enable them to focus on rebuilding.

At the heart of the challenges these people face is their lack of income. A combination of the destruction and violence of June with the resulting atmosphere of mistrust has brought economic activity in Osh to a near standstill and it will be some time before it will return to even a semblance of its previous level. From one perspective, this is simply a fact of life in Osh today and one from which recovery will be a slow process. From another, rebuilding and recovery are especially daunting projects for older people and without extensive support it is unlikely that many older people who were previously able to support themselves will be able to regain this ability.

In the short term, solving the big problem of economic recovery is probably beyond the realm of the possible. However, what is possible is alleviating the strain on the meagre resources of older men and women in Osh. In terms of physical health and emotional wellbeing for the coming winter, it is clear that the priority for action must be ensuring reliable affordable food supplies sufficient for winter preparations as well as wider access to medicine for chronic conditions, especially blood pressure and cardiac problems for which the prognosis is especially poor in such stressful times as these. Without this help many vulnerable older people whose resources are already strained may not survive the coming cold. Additionally, local older people have requested the development of 'friendly spaces,' outside of traditional government or religious structures where they can access social support from health specialists such as psychologists as well as be informed about what services are available to them.

The purpose of this report was to assess the nature of the specific challenges of vulnerable older people in Osh today in order to inspire action on their behalf on the part of Help Age's emergency team as well as all other organizations working in the area. The

results of the survey suggest a myriad of problems including those of emotional, social and subsistence nature. However, the greatest challenges older people in Osh appear to be facing are economic. According to this survey, the economic constraints people are facing are significant enough to have a major detrimental impact on the ability of many of the most vulnerable to feed and clothe both themselves and their dependents. The scale of the problems reported in the survey appears rather large; however, it is the prognosis for the future which holds the most concern. Winter is coming soon and it is clear from this survey that many of the region's most vulnerable will be facing the cold without adequate shelter, clothing or medical supplies and worse, with empty wallets, empty cupboards and empty bellies. Recovery and rebuilding will be necessary if long term peace is to come to Osh, but for the time being it is important to remember the vulnerable and to ensure that they live to see that peace. We strongly recommend that the findings included herein be considered by everyone developing relief projects in Osh in the near future and hope something can be done to address the challenges these vulnerable people are facing.



**HelpAge International** helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

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HelpAge International, Eastern Europe and  
Central Asia

204 Abdrakhmanova Street, 4th Floor

720040 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

Tel: +996 (0312) 66 46 36

[kyrgyzstan@helpageinternational.org](mailto:kyrgyzstan@helpageinternational.org)

[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)

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