

# Ageways

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Pavel Rahman

## **Harnessing culture and media for older people's rights**

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**HelpAge**

*global network*

# Harnessing culture and media for older people's rights

## Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work

HelpAge International has been working with partners and affiliates in Bangladesh for more than 20 years, changing the way older people are viewed and treated. Its advocacy work helped to secure the National Policy for Older Persons in 2013 and the Maintenance of Parents Act 2013, and the Bangladesh country office and partners are now actively engaged in drafting the Older People's Foundation Bill – expected to become law in 2017 to improve older people's wellbeing.

This kind of change requires widespread awareness-raising about older people's issues, and harnessing the power of culture and media is a powerful way to do this. HelpAge International Bangladesh's EC-funded Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project drew on traditional culture to raise awareness of older people's rights, and to promote these rights at policy level. It involved the media in making older people's voices heard, thereby challenging the traditional portrayal of older people as a burden and enabling the media instead to take a lead in positively shaping community perceptions and influencing policy makers.



### Context: the situation of older people in Bangladesh

Old age is a concern in Bangladesh, as the fertility rate is falling and life expectancy is rising (from 48 years in 1961 to 70 years in 2015). According to the Global AgeWatch Index 2015, about 7 percent (11.2 million) of Bangladeshis are now aged 60 or over – a figure set to rise by 22 per cent by 2050.

When it comes to rights and entitlements, older people in Bangladesh face discrimination at the hands of family, society and the state. The respect and status traditionally afforded to older people's role as elders, and the family support structures that used to support them, are rapidly being eroded, not least by the country's high level of internal migration which is largely the result of economic pressures and the rising numbers of women entering the workforce. This is making it difficult for families to support older relatives as they would have done in the past. On the contrary, one survey found that 83.7% older people had faced unfair treatment at the hands of family members.<sup>1</sup>

Older people from Bangladesh's diverse cultural, religious and ethnic minorities are especially vulnerable, as they are the most economically deprived, have poorer access to resources and are progressively losing their land and other assets.<sup>2</sup> Older women are most vulnerable of all – their contribution overlooked because they are outside the mainstream labour force, have lower incomes and fewer assets than men, and are often unaware of their rights and entitlements.

Older men and women in Bangladesh are often systematically excluded in development processes and human rights debates, and their concerns are rarely prioritised by national and international policy makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and NGO funders. In general they have limited access to public services, and government support programmes consistently fail to bridge the gap between older people's needs and means. For example, only 3.15 million of 11.2 million older people in Bangladesh receive the Old Age Allowance (OAA),

and the allowance is in any case too low to meet minimum basic needs.

### Culture and heritage: powerful tools for change

The Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project aimed to improve the wellbeing and public perception of older people by drawing on Bangladesh's deep-rooted and diverse cultural heritage, including traditional art forms such as dance, drama, music, painting and story-telling. This heritage is influenced by three great religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and diverse ethnic minorities.

Traditional performance arts are still very popular at social and religious events in Bangladesh, and are often used to tackle social issues such as children's and women's rights, human trafficking, protection against child marriage, and securing voting rights. Moreover, the potential to use cultural expression to influence policy was strengthened by the fact that Bangladesh already had 50,000 Age Demands Action (ADA) campaigners – the largest single group of ADA campaigners in the world.

### How was the project organised?

HelpAge International and partners, including the Bangladesh Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (BARCIK), Borendra Bhumi Somaj Unnayan Sangstha (BSDO) and BOHUBRIHY, kick-started the project in January 2014. The first task was to organise meetings with local cultural groups, civil society members, media and local government representatives in 30



Pavel Rahman

### Cultural group giving a village performance on older people's issues

locales ('unions')<sup>3</sup> across 13 sub-districts (upazillas)<sup>4</sup> in the four districts of Dinajpur, Manikgonj, Naogaon and Netrakona. A working group comprising a selection of representatives from these interest groups was convened.

Fifteen members from this group formed a working group in each district, and then finally a national-level working group was established from representatives of the four districts. This platform united a range of people with diverse experience, knowledge, ideas and opinions (and with valuable links to influential networks) to promote the rights of older people at local and up to national level. Importantly, these stakeholders came from many age groups, making the project a truly inter-generational effort.

The working groups met at union, upazilla and district level gatherings to prepare campaign action plans. A number of formal and informal meetings, workshops and capacity-building training sessions were also organised to sensitise members – be they performers, journalists or policy makers – on ageing issues.

#### How did the project work?

During the first year of the project, working group members interviewed more than 1,000 traditional performers with excellent performance skills. They then selected the 120 considered most able to promote the rights of older people, based on their performance skills; their interest, willingness and openness to engage with ageing issues; their ability to encourage older people themselves to participate in performances; and on their ability to generate interest among target communities. These 'cultural activists' were formally announced at an event for

civil society and local government representatives in each union.

Training for the cultural activists, and for writers preparing scripts and plays for performance, supporting cast members from communities, and volunteer community mobilisers was then organised on how best to promote older people's rights through performance. As part of this, 12 performers visited the Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA) and development organisation Rupantor – both of which have a strong track record in championing social change through performance.

Performers learned about stagecraft in communities where there are few artists, supporting performers, or resources to make costumes or puppets; how to develop and deliver campaign messages and integrate social awareness of ageing issues into performances, and change negative attitudes towards older people; how to obtain props and other materials; and how to design stages and sets, and manage sound systems. Rehearsals were kept on track by social mobilisation officers (employed by the project's partners), and a community volunteer, both of whom maintained regular communication with the cultural activists themselves.

Other important activities included choosing performance venues through discussion with working groups and the communities themselves, and deciding which prominent and influential public personalities to invite. Banners and leaflets were produced to publicise the event, and a sticker carrying a message about ageing was given to each member of the audience, helping organisers spread the word while keeping track of

audience numbers. Before performances took place, local authorities were informed to ensure security.

'Messages' embedded in the performances were reported by a variety of print and digital media outlets – a process that itself improved the way in which the media recognises and addresses ageing in society (see next section).

Building on increased public awareness, the project engaged government representatives at local, regional and national levels to ensure that the growing public awareness and concern about older people's issues was matched by pledges for political and legislative action (see 'Reaching the policy makers' section).

Myriad cultural art forms such as folk theatre and song, and traditional dance (some of which are dying out because of lack of practice, social and religious barriers or lack of government support) were used in the four districts, providing opportunities for cross-cultural learning and traditional forms of expression. In total, 23 indigenous cultural groups took part in these performances.

1. Baseline survey report on promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work, 2014 Md Ayub Ali and Mehedi Hasan Khan.

2. How ethnic minorities became poor and stay poor in Bangladesh: a qualitative enquiry (Working Paper), Nikhil Chakma, Mathilde Maitrot, July 2016, [www.shiree.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/34-How-ethnic-minorities-became-poor-and-stay-poor-in-Bangladesh-a-qualitative-enquiry.pdf](http://www.shiree.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/34-How-ethnic-minorities-became-poor-and-stay-poor-in-Bangladesh-a-qualitative-enquiry.pdf)

3. The smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh.

4. 'Sub-district' pronounced: upozila, formerly called thana, is a geographical region in Bangladesh used for administrative or other purposes.

# Reaching the media

Older people, especially older women, rarely feature in news, current affairs programmes or drama. And when they do, they and the issue of ageing in general are often presented through a lens of decline and diminishment. The Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project recognised that the media could turn this around and influence people's perceptions about ageing – not only by providing more realistic coverage of older people's issues, but also by acting as a watchdog to secure their rights.

Key to winning media support was a training workshop for journalists on older people's issues. This process started with informal discussions with correspondents from local and national radio on promoting rights of older people, and electronic and print media in Naogaon, Dinajpur, Netrokona and Manikgonj. HelpAge International, BSDO, BARCIK and BOHUBRIHY together organised a training workshop for 116 correspondents in these districts, including 53 local journalists, 60 national correspondents and three community radio journalists. Exchange visits between different cultural events in the project areas were also arranged for 30 media professionals, giving them a broader understanding of ageing issues and enabling them to share their experiences with each other.

## Putting older people in the spotlight

As a result of the workshops and journalist visits, several leading TV and radio stations – ATN Bangla, Jamuna TV, ATN News, Radio Dhoni and Borendro Radio – began incorporating older

people's issues into regular programmes. For example, Jamuna TV explored the needs of health issues in a regular investigative report session, while older people's issues were addressed several times in the Climate Change show on Radio Dhoni 91.2fm.

## Making change happen

Some media coverage resulted in practical improvements for older people. An article in the *Daily Dinkal*, a local newspaper in Mohadevpur, Naogaon district, is one example.

Mr Hossain, a correspondent with the *Daily Dinkal*, noticed a crowd of at least 200 old age allowance recipients outside the local Shonali Bank, and learned that they had been waiting four or five hours to collect their allowance. Some were in visibly poor health and been lying on the ground since morning, with nothing to eat. "The same thing happens every month," one of them complained.

Mr Shakhawat wrote an article about the poor treatment of older people for the *Daily Dinkal* and other media channels. Following publication, the Shonali Bank committed to resolve the problem, providing a prompt service prioritising older people collecting their allowance, and providing designated seating for them.

Romjan Ali, aged 83, from Jahanpur Union, Naogaon was disabled and unable to work after a road traffic accident. "I had request a one wheelchair from people of country. Next day, one people showed my picture in newspaper. After some day, a businessman named Ajijul Haque provided me wheelchair and UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) [Sub-district level head of the administration of the government] of Dhamoirhut Upazila, Naogaon, committed to arrange some government support soon. "I am praying for Mr. Malek and Mr. Ajij. They saved my life. Now I can move at least and will get some support soon"



Balyat Hossain

*“Ensure decent work for older people. Let's stop wage discrimination against older people.”*

Heading in the *Daily Karatoa*,  
1 May 2016

Engaging with the media and journalists was a key part of the project

Topics covered ranged from elder abuse, dementia and older people's healthcare needs in disasters, to work and pensions, entertainment, spaces for older people and older people's contribution to society. Some media outlets went further, mobilising support for vulnerable older people in the form of warm clothes, medical treatment, wheelchairs and old age allowance cards.

Throughout the project period, older people's issues were covered around 800 times in national and local newspapers, nine radio programmes and nine television programmes. More than 150 case studies, special reports and features were published in local and national level media, and over 660 online news items were published about campaign events.

More than 600 media articles, including reports on cultural events, case studies, short features and special reports were published during the course of the project. Some also addressed wider concerns for older people, such as emergency support and safety nets. Electronic media and radio outlets began dedicating regular programme episodes to older people's issues, giving Older People's Associations (OPA) and other networks a platform to air concerns – not least via social media forums where multisectoral interaction was taking place.

Meanwhile, the media itself became a watchdog for protecting rights around access to government services such as safety nets, health and employment, and ensuring humanitarian support and ending violence against older women and men. In addition, local media generated resources to support to older people (see box on facing/previous page).

This media coverage had an impact on local donors and local government bodies. After reading newspaper articles and listening to TV and radio programmes they contacted the journalists writing these stories and offered help (see box on facing/previous page).

**Key steps in planning, organising and launching the Promoting the right of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project**

### Stage 1

## Exploring current situation with cultural activities and setting criteria for selecting cultural groups

- Working with media to assess need for campaign
- Informal discussion with media actors
- Consultation with journalist for project orientation and needs assessment

### Stage 2

## Capacity building on promoting rights of older people

- 120 cultural group representatives receive training, musical instruments and props
- Inter-district and inter-actor exchange visit
- 127 electronic and print media specialists participate in ageingsensitisation workshops
- Learning sharing exchange visit with media actors

### Stage 3

## Campaign launch and establish links through policy dialogue

- Grassroots campaign by 120 cultural groups
- 600 media articles, including electronic and print media
- 13 sub-district and four district festival initiated
- Four policy dialogues initiated
- Media outputs include TVC, documentaries and other communications materials

# Linking with Age Demands Action

Age Demands Action (ADA) is a growing global movement of older campaigners, HelpAge network members and other allies. Campaign actions take place on and around key dates such as World Health Day (7 April), World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (15 June) and the International Day of Older Persons (1 October). The campaign has been running since 2007 to combat age discrimination and promote the rights of older people across the globe. However, many potential stakeholders are not engaged with ADA because they are not aware of the particular needs of older people.

HelpAge's Age Demands Action (ADA) campaign fitted well with – and benefitted from – the Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project, as traditional and social media are important components of the ADA campaign and it too uses cultural traditions such as story-telling as means to highlight the key issues facing older people.

ADA leaders (selected from local communities) were involved in all aspects of the project to ensure that older people's voices were heard and that their

experiences were directly communicated to local and national policy makers.

Through the project, BARCIK, BOHUBRIHY and BSDO established strong links with different government departments, creating opportunities for older people to get access to government services such as prioritised health support, humanitarian support during disasters, and dedicated space for older people's meetings and entertainment etc. These links contributed to policy dialogue, national-level events and local implementation of the project.

A countrywide network of older people's organisations was established, alongside local cultural groups, media houses, press clubs, government and non-government educational institutes and a government district cultural office, *Porbin Hitoysbi Shangha* (government supported countrywide older people association).

Local working groups engaged in the network at district level to mount the campaign under one umbrella. A bridge has been established between media and ADA campaign stakeholders, enabling campaign organisation, local advocacy, and the chance to influence policy. The network support to design, planning and initiation campaign at grassroots level.



Above: Taking part in activities on 1 October – International day of older people



BOHUBRIHY



BOHUBRIHY



BARCIK

## The impact of ADA and the Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project

- More than 1,000 cultural performers, 10 national celebrities and 6 MPs engaged with the ADA campaign in Bangladesh.
- Around 800 cultural performers received training and refresher sessions on ADA campaign approaches.
- A total of 645 musical instruments and 134 sets of props were distributed to 120 cultural groups.
- Around 40,000 people from the four project districts signed a petition calling for a UN convention on the rights of the older people.
- The three ADA campaign days World Health Day (7 April), World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (15 June) and the International Day of Older Persons (October 1) were covered 203 times in the media.
- Almost 110,000 members of the public took part in the ADA campaign.

Far left: Taking part in Action 2015 'Leave no older person' behind campaign

Left: Older women are demonstrating the message of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, 15 June 2014

# Reaching the public

Together, the ADA campaign and the Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project enabled more than 1,000 cultural activists to put on performances promoting the rights of older people, watched by almost 110,000 members of the public, local government officials, members of parliament and media professionals. They also put on 140 performances at local religious and cultural festivals, and as part of government and NGO programmes. Most of the performances took place in public spaces such as fields, market places, local schools and community halls.

In 2015 alone, 120 groups put on 240 special performances – using drama, storytelling and poetry, among others – to support the Age Demands Action campaign on World Health Day, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day and the International Day of Older Persons. Their performances highlighted themes (also popular with ADA activists) such as older people's rights within the family; access to food and clothing; and access to health and government services and social protection. In total, 22 styles of traditional performance were used by the different groups.

To reach a national audience, HelpAge Bangladesh and its partners signed an agreement with leading television channel ATN Bangla to produce a series of debates between performers and policy makers (see 'Reaching the policy makers'

section). These were widely covered by national media, resulting in increasing number of stories about older people's issues appearing in both local and national print and electronic media (see 'Reaching the media' section).

## Moving minds

Using music and drama to tell older people's stories had a strong impact. After hearing the story of Masum Mia (see Box 3), Muslem Uddin, a teacher from Netrakona district, told us: "I am living separately [from my parents] with my family. After attending the cultural campaign, I have realised my mistakes. I will bring my parents to my house and take care of them till death."



Balayut Hossain

Momotaz Begum, Member of Parliament (MP) (pictured), who attended the cultural festival in Singair sub-district, said: "Our parents and older family members have made many contributions to the family and society. So we have to respect them."

## Cultural group secures Old Age Allowance for villagers

Masum Mia, aged 55, is a member of cultural group Baira Sworup Songgho. The five-member group from Baira union in Manikgonj district mainly performs local traditional Bangladeshi songs about social issues.

As a cultural activist, Masum participated in training and workshops organised by BARCIK on older peoples rights. In 2015 he helped about 10 older community members who faced discrimination by their family in relation to food, clothing, accommodation and medical services. In addition, Masum Mia communicated with the Baira Union to apply for certain members of the community to receive the Old Age Allowance. As a result, Dewan Zinnha, Chairman of Baira Union, ensured receipt of the old age allowance for three older people and committed to include more eligible older people for the allowance after consultation with cultural group members.

Masum Mia said he had never approached local government to request the Old Age Allowance for community members before he became part of the Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work project's activities.



BARCIK

Two older people have received old age allowance card with support of cultural group's members



## Older people's rights are everyone's rights

Gitanjali Kirton Dal, a 20-member popular cultural activist group in Sundarban village, Dinajpur district, performs at local social and religious (Hindu) festivals.

Group leader Durga Chorán Roy understands why older people's rights are everyone's rights. "Older people's rights are important for all of us," he says. "We are working not only for our parents but also for our future."

Through HelpAge International partner BOHUBRIHY, the performers learned, among other things, about older people's rights and entitlements; the Age Demands Action (ADA) campaign; policies on older persons; and institutional facilities for older people. They organised their own community-level campaigns, took part in sub-district competitions and performed at district cultural festivals. Each Thursday evening Durga Chorán Roy organised a discussion session for community members and a cultural programme on older person's issues, supported by local volunteers.

As a result of these discussions, the group supported 27 local older people who were struggling for food, clothes, medical care and a voice in family decision-making. They persuaded the chairman of their village council to ensure the government Old Age Allowance for seven more villagers, while the doctor at the community clinic committed to providing free services for older persons. More than 100 older people received a free medical check-up and free medication from the clinic.

*"We are working not only for our parents but also for our future."*

Durga Chorán Roy

One of the 120 cultural events that took place



Pevel Rahman

# Reaching the policy makers

With the media on board, policy makers are likely to become more accountable and more willing to report on progress. With this in mind, the Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work arranged a series of TV and radio discussions with policy makers, creating an opportunity for older people's associations to influence policy. As a result, members of parliament, representatives from relevant government departments and ministries started to advocate in favour of older people's rights.

The discussions explored ways to improve older people's situation, including setting up a foundation for

ensuring wellbeing of vulnerable older people; developing an action plan to implement the National Policy on Older Persons 2013 and Parents Maintenance Act 2013; plans to adopt laws to protect older people from abuse; increasing the amount paid by the Old Age Allowance and improve its distribution; and extending the scheme to cover more older people. They also covered themes addressed by the ADA campaign, including a call for a UN convention on the rights of older people.

The campaign also strengthened links between older people's groups and national and local government, local service providers, police, and Members of Parliament etc.

## Changes in the air

The policy dialogues and public hearings contributed to some encouraging developments:

- Dr Dipu Moni MP pledged to attend the UN Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG) meeting in December 2016.
- In a budget session of parliament, Dr Dipu Moni MP argued for the adoption of a universal pension in Bangladesh.
- An Older People's Foundation Bill was drafted in 2015 by the Department of Social Services (Ministry of Social Welfare), with the assistance of HelpAge International.
- Some sections of the Parents Maintenance Act 2016 were drafted by the Department of Social Services (Ministry of Social Welfare), with the assistance of HelpAge International.
- An action plan for implementing the National Policy on Older Persons has been drafted.
- The Honourable President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh declared people aged 60 or over as "Senior citizens" on 27 November 2014 in recognition of older people's contribution.



*“Old age is not an obstacle. We need to help older people to achieve our goal of being a better society. Government is working on it. Now 60 and 60+ people are ‘senior citizens’ and they will enjoy their rights soon, as they contributed to build the society.”*

**Ismat Ara Sadique MP, Minister of State, Ministry of Public Administration, in policy dialogue on IDOP-2015**

# Overcoming obstacles



Older people and media persons forming a human chain on ADA on Health 2016 in front of the National press club, Dhaka

Balayati Hossain

An ambitious project such as the Promoting the rights of older people and influencing policy through cultural campaigning and media work was never going to be easy, and a number of challenges arose. To begin with, there were no 'scripts' relating to older people's rights that existed for use in performances, so these had to be written from scratch.

Most of the performers were day labourers who were free only in the evenings, so performances were organised in the evenings. However, evening events were less convenient for government officials and journalists to attend. Overall, audience numbers were lower than planned because of events including local government (Pourashova) elections.

Audience safety and security (in part due to religious extremism) was a big concern. Project staff ensured that local police stations and local government institutions were informed of performance times and expected audience numbers in advance to ensure security during the performances.

## Using culture and media to publicise older people's issues

### Age Demands Action on health

More than 3,600 people took part in the ADA campaign around World Health Day 2016 under the banner 'beat diabetes'. Throughout the events listed below, members of parliament, government administrators, government medical advisors and practitioners, government and NGO health service providers, network members, OPA leaders, district working group members, journalists and students participated in programmes addressing World Health Day 2016, which focussed on the subject of diabetes.

### Cultural interventions

Four cultural programmes, five rallies and four discussion programmes were jointly initiated by local government and TV networks in Dinajpur, Manikgonj, Naogaon, Netrokona districts, focusing the message of World Health Day 2016 as it related to older people. In Dhaka, a skating rally as new intervention was initiated, where Banner, some placards & T-shirts explored the messages.

### Media interventions

A policy discussion programme featuring policy makers, campaigners and networks on the theme of World Health Day 2016 was aired in April 2016 by TV channel ATN Bangla.

"In the Ministry of Health's 7th five-year-plan, older people will be considered as prioritised stakeholders in every [part] of health service delivery," pledged Professor Dr. A.H.M Enayet Hussain.

A discussion programme called Health Talk of older people was aired in April 2016 by Borendro Radio 99.2fm.

Two discussion programmes – "Change environment: older people's health" and "Doctors talk" were aired by Radio Dhoni 91.2fm, featuring OPA delegates.



BARCIK

## World Elder Abuse Awareness Day 2016

### Cultural campaigning to policy dialogue

Four cultural performances, discussion programmes and three human chains took place with the participation of older people, civil society, cultural actors, development workers, youth groups, students and journalists in the four focus districts. The cultural performances and dialogues strengthened public opinion on the concept UN Convention on older people's rights, and awareness about older abuse.

Media initiatives 63 (including 01 BBC, 01 community radio, 3 TV and 10 national) coverages were popularized the message of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day 2016 from international, national and local electronic and print media.

In launching the ADA on Rights 2016 campaign in Bangladesh, Independent TV dedicated an episode of its popular show and aired on the occasion of WEAAD 2016 on 11 June with technical assistance of HelpAge International, Bangladesh.

Visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnUnziNvGKI&feature=youtu.be>

In June, Nirjharinee Hasan, Country Director of HelpAge in Bangladesh, was interviewed in regular morning show Protoshya on BBC Bangla.

Visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhNhdN6AS0g&feature=youtu.be>

A message for demanding UN Convention to ensure dignified and secure elderly life had been scrolled day long with giving specific interval on ATN Bangla.

A public hearing-style programme involving policy makers, PA/campaigners, activist representatives, academics and students was aired in June on ATN Bangla to foster active participation of the government in demanding a UN convention and influence implementation of National Policy on Older Persons 2013.



**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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*Ageways* exchanges practical information on ageing and development, particularly good practice developed in the HelpAge network.

HelpAge International, PO Box 70156, London WC1A 9GB, UK  
[info@helpage.org](mailto:info@helpage.org)  
 Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 7778 (switchboard)  
[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)

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