

A rising force for change:

Older people and climate action

HelpAge

International



Ganesht Bista/Ageing Nepal

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The climate crisis is the most pressing issue of our time. It is an issue on which every day older people in different settings around the world are using their voices, knowledge and energy to make a difference. Engaging and empowering older people's voice and actions in tackling the climate crisis can build even greater support for the climate movement.

In action with neighbours, friends, and family of all ages, older people are a force for change. From calling on leaders and politicians to take concrete action, to bringing about practical change in their communities through initiatives to help people adapt and prepare, many older people are making their voices heard. As the world gears up for the global climate summit in Glasgow in November (COP26, see box on page 8), this briefing explains why older people's engagement in the fight against climate change is crucial.

The importance of an inclusive response to climate change in an ageing world.

An inclusive, intergenerational response is the only way to address the climate crisis that will define the lives of every person of every age over the next century.

But leadership on climate action must adapt and prepare for radically different demographics in the world. There will be more than two billion older people in the world by 2050 – doubling from 10 to 20 per cent of the overall population – and, for the first time in recorded history, there will be more people over the age of 60 than children aged under 15.

Adapting and preparing for the future of an ageing planet under threat is all of our responsibility, whatever our age.

2/3
of older people live
in countries with a
higher risk of
climate-related
disasters.

Older people on the frontline of the climate crisis

Many older people have the experience to know what communities will increasingly face if the climate crisis is not adequately addressed. They have directly felt the consequences of climate change on their daily lives and have witnessed real changes on the planet in their lifetimes. They know the impact that continued climate change will have for the future of their families and their communities. Two thirds of the world's older people also live in low- and middle-income countries where there is a higher risk of climate-related disasters¹ – like floods, hurricanes, and tropical storms – and the impact of such disasters often disproportionately hits older people.

The adverse effects of climate change have a broad range of negative human rights impacts. These impacts fall more heavily on those who are already in vulnerable situations, owing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status, national or social origin, birth or other status, and disability.²

As we see in the stories that follow, older people can have a powerful and strong voice when calling for change and supporting mitigation and adaptation activities. This is often done through Older Persons Associations, where diverse older people come together in their communities as respected leaders and custodians of historical local knowledge and traditional, sustainable practices.



Ben Small/HelpAge International



Voice: Many older people are demanding climate action by governments. They have a right to be heard.

Remembering the lush ecosystem of the past to demand action for the future

Doña Inocencia González Saiz was a proud and respected member of the Cocopah people who live in the Colorado river delta near Mexicali, northern Mexico. Doña Inocencia remembered well how the now-dry riverbed used to teem with fish and waterfowl when she was growing up. As desertification of the delta over the past decade threatened the livelihoods and culture of her community, Doña Inocencia loudly, repeatedly, and successfully called for government action from both sides of the US-Mexico border to restore the once lush ecosystem. Doña Inocencia González Saiz sadly passed away from COVID-19 in June 2021, aged 84.

“I miss the river, it’s where we come from, it’s who we are. Now, everything has changed, the youngsters can’t swim in the river and we’ve no choice but to fish in polluted water.”

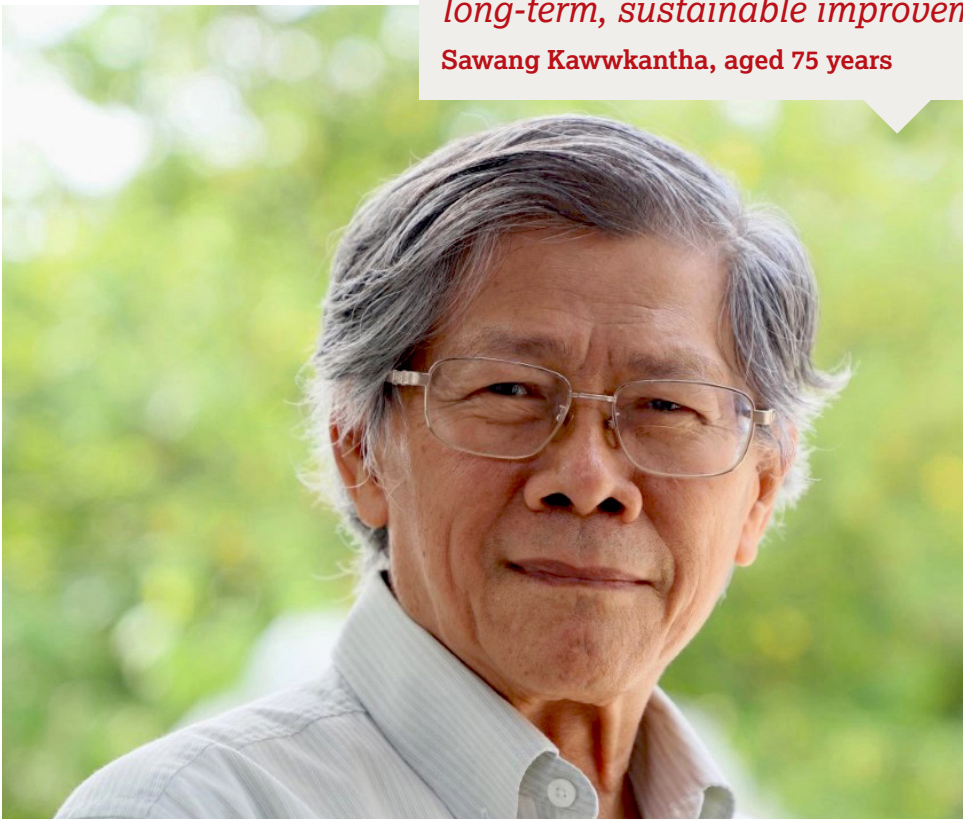
Doña Inocencia González Saiz

Demanding the right to breathe clean air

In Thailand, the Foundation for Older Persons' Development (FOPDEV), has been supporting academic research into the impacts of air pollution, sharing stories of their day-to-day lives and demanding action from government to reduce emissions of 'fine-particulate matter' (PM2.5), which is associated with many serious diseases.

“We don't have clean air to breathe. The impact of high levels of PM2.5 for older people and their communities is significant. The government encourages older people to stay indoors to avoid the pollution, a form of self-isolation that makes life hard for them. Existing government actions are short term and don't deliver long-term, sustainable improvements.”

Sawang Kawwkantha, aged 75 years



FOPDEV

Building on experience, leadership, and influence to call for climate justice

The Elders³ – a global group of older statespersons and activists – stand firmly behind the goal of limiting climate change to 1.5°C. They also call for climate justice, with richer countries supporting low-income countries to adapt to the impacts of the climate crisis. Alongside the other Elders, former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is calling for just action on climate change.

“As the scientific evidence mounts, so too does the need to address the concerns vulnerable countries are raising around loss and damage, and adaptation finance.”

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, aged 82 years

Intergenerational solidarity around political empowerment

In India's Thar desert, an organisation called Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS) has been holding intergenerational learning groups to bring girls, women and older women together to share their knowledge, better understand the climate crisis, and build their political influence and empowerment.

Investing in older people as environmental ambassadors

In Chile, the National Service for Older People (SENAMA) is investing in older people's knowledge and awareness of climate and environmental issues. Through workshops and inspirational talks, older people are becoming 'environmental ambassadors' in recognition of the fact that care of the environment is an intergenerational responsibility.

Action: Older people are driving mitigation and adaptation activities in their communities.

As active members of their communities, respected leaders and holders of traditional and historical knowledge, many older people are taking a strong role in exciting and innovative climate mitigation and adaptation activities at the community level.



Le Minh Duc/HelpAge Vietnam

Capturing carbon and enhancing soil in villages

Older people in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam have been converting plant waste into soil enhancer (biochar) – capturing carbon that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere. Engaging older people in appropriate, low-cost, small-scale activities at the community level – such as biochar production – can have a massive impact. Producing biochar can enable one single village to remove 1,000 tonnes of CO² in a year, while improving soil health and productivity.

“Our world is getting hotter because we are putting too much CO² in the atmosphere. Using biochar can help capture and store carbon.”

Nataporn Bangtakun, aged 77 years

Sustainable water management and organic vegetable production

In rural Bolivia, Karina Leon, from community organisation Sumaj Punchay, works with older people to build on their historical knowledge of the area to identify and sustainably manage local water sources. Older people are also sharing traditional knowledge on soil recovery to responsibly increase yields, diversify crops, support organic fruit and vegetable production, and provide a surplus to take to local markets.

“Crop production that is healthy, organic and sustainable and which respects the land and natural resources is part of the traditions and knowledge of older people and has a role to play in protecting the environment.”

Karina Leon

We stand on the shoulders of older climate action pioneers.

Looking back, we can see many examples of activists and scientists continuing their work into older age. Without their pioneering work, today’s environmental movement would not exist.

The leader of the Chipko movement, Sunderlal Bahuguna, was 74 years old when he was arrested for opposing the Tehri Dam in India, following a lifetime of environmental activism. Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai continued her tireless campaigning and political work to protect the environment and biodiversity until her death aged 71.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, member of the Ogoni people in Nigeria and environmental activist that challenged the multinational petroleum industry and its degradation of his homeland, was executed for his campaigning work aged 54.

Rachel Carson and Joe Farman were both 55 when they each made seminal contributions to the environmental movement. Carson’s work raised broad awareness of the harmful impacts of pesticides, inspiring an environmental movement that led to the creation of the US Environmental Protection Agency, while Farman proved the existence of the ozone hole over Antarctica.

The achievements of these and many other older environmental activists and scientists, pioneers of their age, form the foundation of the environmental movement as it exists today – and the potential for older people to continue to strengthen the movement is clear.



Chingiz Namazaliev/HelpAge International



Fedaa Qataishah/HelpAge Jordan

Older people's voice and action – just like those of others in their communities – are central to the fight against the climate crisis.

The climate crisis impacts everyone, and the solutions must include everyone. The rights and agency of older people must be recognised and respected alongside everyone else. We stand the best chance of succeeding in demanding meaningful climate action, holding leaders to account, and bringing about the necessary change if we work together across all generations.

To strengthen the fight against the climate crisis, HelpAge International is calling for all with the power to do so – be it local and national governments, civil society, non-governmental organisations, and the broad environmental movement – to work with older people to:

- **amplify their voices when demanding action and holding leaders accountable at the local and national levels;**
- **ensure that community climate mitigation and adaptation initiatives engage, support, and involve them;**
- **ensure that they can learn and be informed about the climate crisis, its consequences, and what can be done to help;**
- **make sure their rights and agency are recognised and respected in the fight against the climate crisis and dispel ageist perceptions that marginalise their role.**

Endnotes

1. UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division; *World Population Prospects, key findings and advance tables*; 2019 revision

2. www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/HRAndClimateChange/Pages/RightsOlderPersons.aspx

3. The Elders is an international non-governmental organisation of public figures noted as senior statespersons, peace activists, and human rights advocates, who were brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007. They describe themselves as “independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights”.

HelpAge International is a global network of 163 civil society and community organisations working with older people across more than 80 countries. We are united in listening to older people's voices and recognising their actions.

HelpAge International is committed to standing side-by-side with older people affected by and adapting to the reality of climate change, as well as those campaigning for climate action to create a safer future for all ages.

COP26: The world's last best hope to avoid the worst consequences of climate change.



- The 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) takes place in Glasgow, UK, from 31 October to 12 November 2021. Established by the UN, COP1 took place in 1995.
- At COP25 in Paris in 2015, countries agreed to make changes to keep global warming 'well below' 2°C above pre-industrial levels – and to aim for 1.5°C – in order to avoid climate catastrophe. Scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change say that holding the rise in global average temperature to 1.5°C will avoid the worst impacts of climate change.
- The outcome of COP25, known as the Paris Agreement, united the world's nations in committing to tackle global warming and cut greenhouse gas emissions by making emissions cuts until reaching net zero in 2050. Global carbon emissions need to fall by 45% from 2010 levels by the end of this decade – without this there is no chance of meeting long-term targets. However, apart from a brief period during COVID-19 lockdowns, emissions are rising.
- At COP26, countries need to put forward roadmaps to net zero and money to help less developed countries reach their goals without suffering economic hardship. Other commitments are expected, such as speeding up the phasing out of coal power, cutting down fewer trees, and protecting more people from the impacts of climate change.

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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