

# How rural and farm populations are ageing



## Key messages

- In low- and middle-income countries the proportion of older people living in rural areas is increasing and the proportion of younger people is declining. The proportion of older farmers specifically is significant and growing.
- The majority of economically active older people in rural areas of low- and middle-income countries derive their primary income from agriculture.
- Governments, donors, international and national non-government organisations and the private sector need to develop a better understanding of opportunities and constraints that farmers face across the life course.
- It is crucial that older farmers have equal access to productive resources and training on innovative practices and technologies to improve their production levels, food security and cash income.
- Social protection floors that include non-contributory old-age pensions will help to protect and enhance agricultural assets.

## Background

Despite the increasing importance of rural and farm population ageing, little is known about the level and pace of rural demographic change in developing countries.<sup>1</sup> This brief presents an analysis of existing data sets in order to look at the changing rural and farm demographic structures in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> It highlights the ageing of rural populations and the importance of agriculture to the livelihoods of older women and men.

## Older people's reliance on farming

In sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America, agriculture continues to be the most important source of livelihood for the vast majority of economically active older people, particularly older women. In all three regions, older people are more likely than other age groups to be working in agriculture than in other sectors (see Figure 1).

In Asia, agriculture represents the largest proportion of employment for the older population. Data on employment by industry, taken from the ILO Labour Force Surveys and UNSD Demographic Statistics on economic activity, show that 75 per cent of people over 60 reported agriculture as their main income-generating activity.

Similarly, in sub-Saharan Africa, a large majority of older people (73 per cent) reported agriculture as a source of income.

In Latin America, where urbanisation has taken place rapidly and at large scale, agriculture is a less significant source of employment for older people compared with other sectors. Proportionately, older people were more likely to be engaged in agriculture than the other age groups, with 35 per cent reporting agriculture as an income activity.

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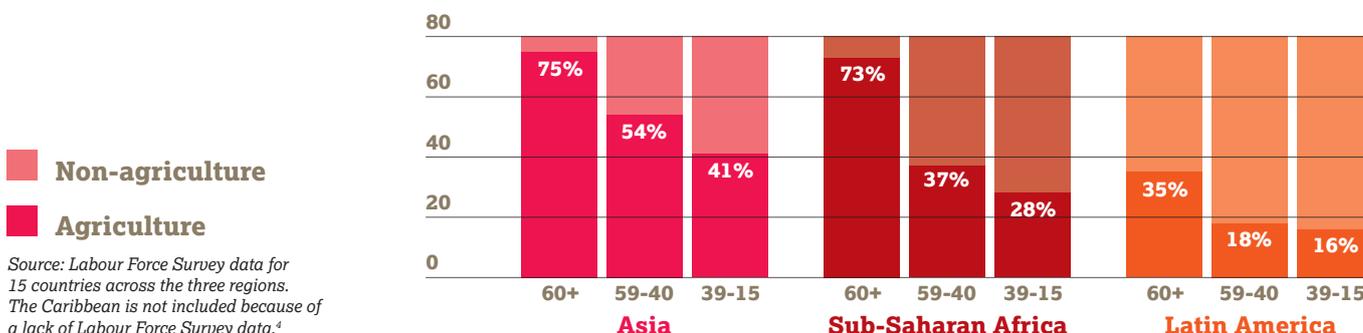
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**Brief 7**

There appears to be an implicit assumption by policy makers and development practitioners that older farmers – when considered at all – are less productive, more risk averse and less innovative than younger ones. However, an FAO-supported study in Thailand found no support for such views.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Distribution of older and younger people’s employment, by region and sector**



■ Non-agriculture

■ Agriculture

Source: Labour Force Survey data for 15 countries across the three regions. The Caribbean is not included because of a lack of Labour Force Survey data.<sup>4</sup>

**Important for women**

Agriculture is an important source of livelihood for economically active women above the age of 60 years, although more so in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa than in Latin America.

In Asia, agriculture represents the most important source of employment for women above 60 years, employing 62 per cent of all economically active older women over 60. In sub-Saharan Africa, 58.7 per cent of economically active older women above 60 years are employed in agriculture.

In Latin America, agriculture was less significant overall as a source of employment. Among economically active older women above 60 years, 24.5 per cent are employed in agriculture.



Judith Escrivano/Age International

**Social protection to improve food security**

Social protection schemes such as old-age pensions can help to protect older farmers’ assets and improve household food security.

In Mozambique, cash transfers under the government’s food subsidy programme help older farmers such as 63-year-old Maria (pictured), a widow caring for four orphaned grandchildren in Tete Province. She grows maize, sorghum and groundnuts, mainly for household consumption, and keeps a few cows and goats. “I live off the land,” she says. “I work every day to ensure my crops are growing well. I [recently] got my ID card. I am now an INAS [National Institute for Social Action] beneficiary and I can claim some money from the government to buy some food for me and my family.”

In Kagera, Tanzania, recipients of an NGO-run pension scheme to poor rural households use the money to hire day labour on their farms. “Before getting the pension it was very hard,” said one pensioner. “When I got the pension I managed to spend part of it on cultivating [day labour] and part on food. The day labour really supports me.”

A widow’s pension provides vital support to older women such as Shilu Kumari Shrestha, 75, who lives in a remote part of Tanahu District, central Nepal. She keeps a few goats and has received a widow’s pension for the last 15 years. “My pension money is mainly spent on food and I contribute a small amount to the education of my sister’s daughters. I use the money to feed the goats as well.”

Sources: *Towards universal pensions in Tanzania: evidence on opportunities and challenges from a remote area*, Ngenge ward, Kagera, HelpAge International, HelpAge Deutschland and Kwa Wazee Switzerland, 2014; HelpAge interviews, www.flickr.com/photos/helpageimages (12 December 2014)

1. Stloukal L, *What can agricultural censuses tell us about rural population ageing in developing countries?* Rome, FAO Sustainable Development Department, 2000

2. This paper is based on Heide-Ottosen S, HelpAge International, *The ageing of rural populations: evidence on older farmers in low-and middle-income countries*, London, HelpAge International, 2014

3. Bryant J and Gray R, *Rural population ageing and farm structure in Thailand*, Population and Development Service, Sustainable Development Department, FAO, 2005, p.30

4. Labour Force Survey data for Thailand, Bhutan, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Nepal, Vietnam, Botswana, Benin, Lesotho, Swaziland, Brazil, Costa Rica and Colombia, 1998-2013; ILO Rural Labour Statistics data for Namibia, 1991; UN Statistics Division demographic data for Peru, 2007

## Why rural populations are ageing

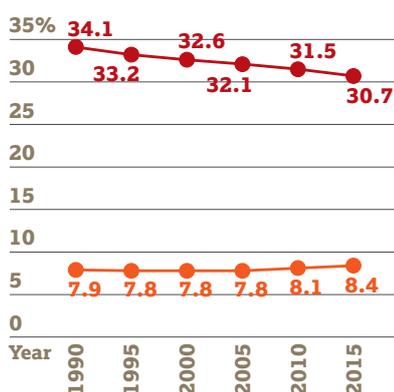
An analysis of datasets including United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division data, national agricultural censuses and Labour Force Surveys (LFS) shows a universal trend across regions, from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia to Latin America and the Caribbean: there is an increase in the proportion of older people living in rural areas and a decline in the proportion of younger people.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 illustrate this trend for Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Despite differences in the pace and level of ageing, the evidence suggests that many rural populations are ageing, and this trend is expected to continue apace.

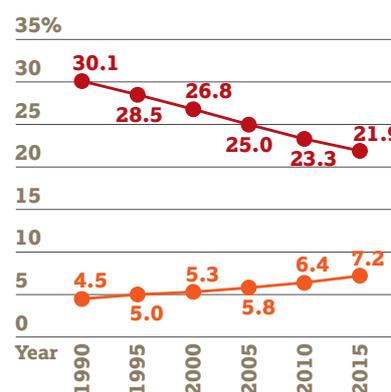
**Figure 2: Rural population ageing in Asia**



**Figure 3: Rural population ageing in sub-Saharan Africa\***



**Figure 4: Rural population ageing in Latin America**



● Under 10 ● Over 65\*

Source: UNDESA, *World Population Prospects: the 2012 revision*, 2013<sup>5</sup>

\*Over 55 in sub-Saharan Africa due to insufficient disaggregated data for the population over 65.

The reasons for rural population ageing reflect an array of factors. The overarching reason is the age-selective nature of rural-urban migration, which sees younger people migrating to the towns and cities, while older people stay behind. In some cases, return migration of older adults from urban areas back to their rural homes is also a reality.<sup>6</sup>

Rural ageing is a complex phenomenon; it is not likely to follow a uniform pattern, but will depend on context-specific social and economic factors. It is therefore over-simplistic to attribute rural demographic ageing trends across the developing world solely to younger people's migration to cities.

There are many other important factors, such as the impacts of changes in fertility and mortality rates on population age structures, rates of urbanisation and the complex patterns of migration, and the continuing effects of HIV and AIDS, which also need to be taken into account.

As well as differences between countries, there will inevitably be important differences within countries. Further research is required to better understand these differences.

5. Asia: Bhutan, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Africa: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Comoros, Congo (DRC), Djibouti, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Latin America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Nicaragua and Peru. Country selections are based on the availability of data.

6. Kinsella K, 'Urban and rural dimensions of global population ageing: an overview', *The Journal of Rural Health* 17, 4, 2001, pp.314-322

## More older farmers

An analysis of agricultural census data shows that, in particular, the proportion of older farmers specifically is significant and growing. The percentage of farmers over 55 is 7.1 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 12.1 per cent in Asia, 25.3 per cent in the Caribbean and 12.3 per cent in Latin America (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Average proportion of the overall farm population and agricultural holders over the age of 55**

Region	% of farm population 55+	% of agricultural holders 55+
The Caribbean	25.3	44.7
Central and South America	12.3	29.8
Asia	12.1	28.5
Africa	7.1	26.8

Source: Agricultural census data for 55 countries across the four regions<sup>7</sup>

The emerging picture of an ageing farm population is confirmed by the data on agricultural holders (defined as the person who exercises management control over the agricultural holding and makes major decisions around resource use):<sup>8</sup> globally, 27.5 per cent of agricultural holders are aged over 55. The average proportion of agricultural holders over the age of 55 is 26.8 per cent in Africa, 28.5 per cent in Asia, 44.7 per cent in the Caribbean and 29.8 per cent in Latin America.

## Regional variations

Agricultural census data shows that farming populations are ageing most rapidly in South East Asia and southern Africa. For example, in Thailand, Vietnam, Botswana and Lesotho there was a significant increase (averaging 5 per cent) in the number of people over 55 in the farm population, mirrored by a decrease in the number of younger people in less than a decade. There is limited data available for the Caribbean and Central and South America, so it is not possible to make more general statements for these two regions.

### Sub-Saharan Africa: a diverse picture

For sub-Saharan Africa, there is regional diversity in the level and pace of farm population ageing. The most recent census data shows that 26.8 per cent of all agricultural holders are aged over 55 years. Generally, there is a concentration of older agricultural holders in the region: for 15 out of 22 countries for which data is available for agricultural holders, more than one-third of agricultural holders are over 55. All of the countries in the region have more than 20 per cent of older agricultural holders.

The farm population over the age of 55 accounts for 7.1 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. There are vast differences between countries however; the proportion of older farmers ranges from 6.3 per cent in Niger to 15.9 per cent in the Seychelles.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, there are also regional disparities in overall levels of farm population ageing. The trend is occurring most rapidly in southern Africa. Two countries which illustrate this are Botswana and Lesotho, which have both seen significant increases in the proportion of people over 55 attached to agricultural holdings over the past decade, mirrored by a decrease in the proportion of younger people.

7. Census years range from 1986 to 2012. For full details see Heide-Ottosen S, *The ageing of rural populations*, Annex 1: Indicators of farm population ageing in low- and middle-income countries, p.22

8. FAO, *World programme for the census of agriculture 2010*, Rome, FAO Economic and Social Development Department, 2010

## **Asia: rapid farm population ageing**

For Asia as a whole, there is evidence that farm populations and the sub-group of agricultural holders are ageing. The average proportion of the farm population over the age of 55 is 12.1 per cent.

The most recent census data shows that 28.5 per cent of holders are over the age of 55. There is variation between countries: Lao PDR has 22.1 per cent of older holders, while Lebanon has 43.7 per cent.

Nepal is one example of an Asian country that has seen an increase in the proportion of older agricultural holders (over 55 years), rising by just over 3 per cent between 1992 and 2002. Considering that the agricultural holder population increased by almost 1 million during this period, this represents a significant increase in the absolute number of older farmers.

## **The Caribbean: ageing not a new phenomenon**

In the Caribbean, the average proportion of the farm population over 55 years is 25.3 per cent, with proportions by country ranging from 15 per cent in Grenada to 35.8 per cent in St Vincent and the Grenadines. Due to the lack of longitudinal data, it was not possible to assess the pace and level of the ageing of the overall farm population in this region.

The Caribbean is the region with the highest proportion of agricultural holders – 44.7 per cent – being over 55. However, it must be noted that an ageing farm population is not a new phenomenon in this region, as these figures are taken from the 1990 census round, which is the most recent accessible data.

A large share of older agricultural holders is the norm for the region. The proportion of holders above the age of 55 ranges from 32.2 per cent in St Vincent and the Grenadines to 62.8 per cent in Puerto Rico.

There are also signs that agricultural holders are ageing. In St Vincent and the Grenadines, for example, the proportion of holders above 65 years increased by more than 2 per cent in just over a decade. There was an overall decrease in the rural population during this period, suggesting that relative rural population ageing is occurring.



Jenny Anderson/HelpAge International

## **Farming and learning**

The Caribbean has the highest proportion of older farmers, with 25 per cent over the age of 55. Matilda Blake, 85, is one of them. She grows plantain, bananas, cocoa and yellow yam in Portland Parish, Jamaica to support herself and her 89-year-old disabled husband.

Tropical storms are a regular hazard. Two years ago, Matilda's farm was badly hit by Hurricane Sandy. "It brought down my plantain trees and a field of yellow yam – a landslide took it away. It had a big effect because my customers wanted plantain but I didn't have any. I had to buy some from another person and pay people to help clear my land."

Since then Matilda has restored her crops and received training to protect her land. "I learnt that I have to dig trenches to stop landslides. When the water comes down, instead of taking away the whole field, there is a trench to lead the water away. I have also learnt not to cut down certain trees because they hold the soil."

Matilda is part of a farmers' group and passes on what she has learnt. "We meet and I explain to the others what they are supposed to do to protect their crops."

Source: [www.flickr.com/photos/helpageimages](http://www.flickr.com/photos/helpageimages) (12 December 2014)

9. United Nations, Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, para 32.

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## Central and South America: old and ageing

In Central and South America, the average proportion of the farm population over the age of 55 is 12.3 per cent. There are significant variations between countries, however. Uruguay has a relatively large older farm population, with 22.4 per cent over the age of 55 and 11 per cent over 65. Meanwhile, Paraguay has a smaller older farm population, with 8.9 per cent older than 55 of whom 4.1 per cent are over 65.

It is difficult to make generalisations about this region, as there was relatively little age-disaggregated data available for many countries. However, where data was available, it revealed a high proportion of older agricultural holders, averaging 29.8 per cent. Of these, 15.4 per cent are over 65 years old.

Argentina was notable for having a particularly high proportion of older agricultural holders. In 2002, nearly 50 per cent of agricultural holders were above the age of 55. This proportion is significantly higher than for other countries in the region.

Other countries had a high proportion of holders over the age of 65, in particular Nicaragua (16.1 per cent) and Peru (15.6 per cent).

Panama illustrates the ageing of agricultural holders that is taking place. From 1990 to 2000, the country saw an increase of almost 3 per cent in the proportion of agricultural holders over 55 years. Over the same period, the proportion of holders aged over 65 increased by almost 2 per cent.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The ageing of rural populations demands attention from policy-makers and practitioners alike. The prevailing view, which labels older farmers as unproductive and unable to adopt new technologies and practices, is perpetuating myths and discrimination against older farmers, and prevents an adequate response to the challenges and opportunities presented by the trend of rural and farm population ageing.

Given that the majority of economically active older people in rural areas derive their primary income from agriculture, it is crucial to ensure that they have equal access to productive resources and support. All stakeholders – including governments, donors, international and national non-government organisations (NGOs), and the private sector – need to develop a better understanding of opportunities and constraints that farmers face across the life course.

In line with the objectives for improving the living conditions and infrastructure in rural areas set out in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing<sup>9</sup> we make the following recommendations:

- Foster older farmers' access to appropriate financial services, including microcredit schemes and microfinance institutions.
- Ensure equal access of older farmers to training and support on innovative practices, innovative technologies and market linkages.
- Ensure that rural livelihood support programmes take into account the strengths and constraints of older farmers and promote appropriate solutions such as labour-saving technologies.
- Promote ongoing adult education, training and retraining in rural areas.
- Promote the right of older women in rural areas to equal access to and control of economic resources.
- Implement appropriate social protection measures including basic social services for older people in rural areas.
- Carry out research to better understand the challenges and opportunities of an ageing farm workforce and linkages between older and younger farmers.