

‘Rapid population ageing: a global call to action’.

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Introduction

Population ageing is one of the most misunderstood, misrepresented features of demography. Rather than just being a future of doom and gloom, ageing is simply the reality of the twenty-first century, and one which we need to adapt to in a systemic, holistic, intergenerational manner. If we do so, we can not only head off some of the challenges of ageing, but instead reap real benefits for individuals, societies and economies.

As it heads into the following decades, HelpAge International and other organisations working with older persons can take a unique position to not only maintain its legacy of promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives but also to be the global change agent in reframing our entire view of population ageing, and the instrumental role which older people will play in economic and social development in the twenty-first century. Indeed, adding the ***reframing of the entire narrative surrounding population ageing to its existing strategic goals could be a truly transformative role for HelpAge International.***

Population ageing: a misunderstood phenomenon

In the minds of many, population ageing tends to bring up two initial images. The first is a micro-level one: of a vulnerable, frail, infirm older person such as the type represented on a road sign or a thousand infographics. The second macro-level image is that these older persons predominantly live in Japan, China, Italy, France, Florida, etc. The overarching message, though, is the same: that these older persons are going to be a drag on the economy. The ‘cure’? More babies and raise the pension age.

As with all stereotypes, of course, there is some - perhaps even a lot - of truth here. There are hundreds of millions of older, frail people in the world, and there will always be. In relative terms, again, there is no doubt that countries and territories in Europe, North America and East Asia have a more significant proportion of older persons than anywhere else in the world. More babies will undoubtedly slow the pace of population ageing, and raising the pension age is an inevitable policy change in many countries worldwide.

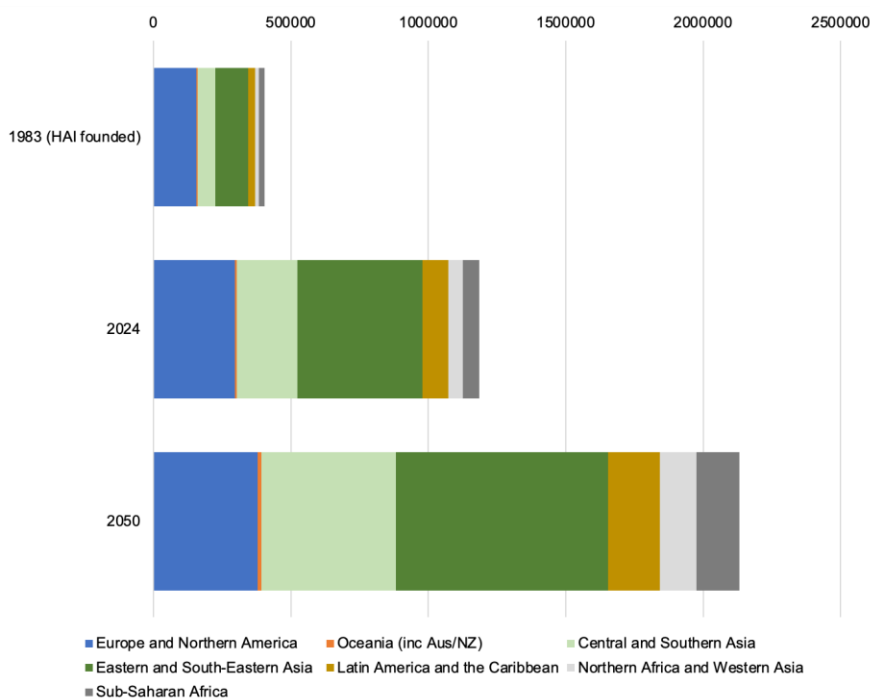
This is where the narrative of population ageing usually stops. However, of course, it is grossly incomplete.

Firstly, the kind of infirm, vulnerable persons who we see represented on road signs represent only a small fraction of the global older population. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate later, this older population is getting healthier, wealthier and more highly skilled as every year passes through the ‘demographic metabolism’ process.

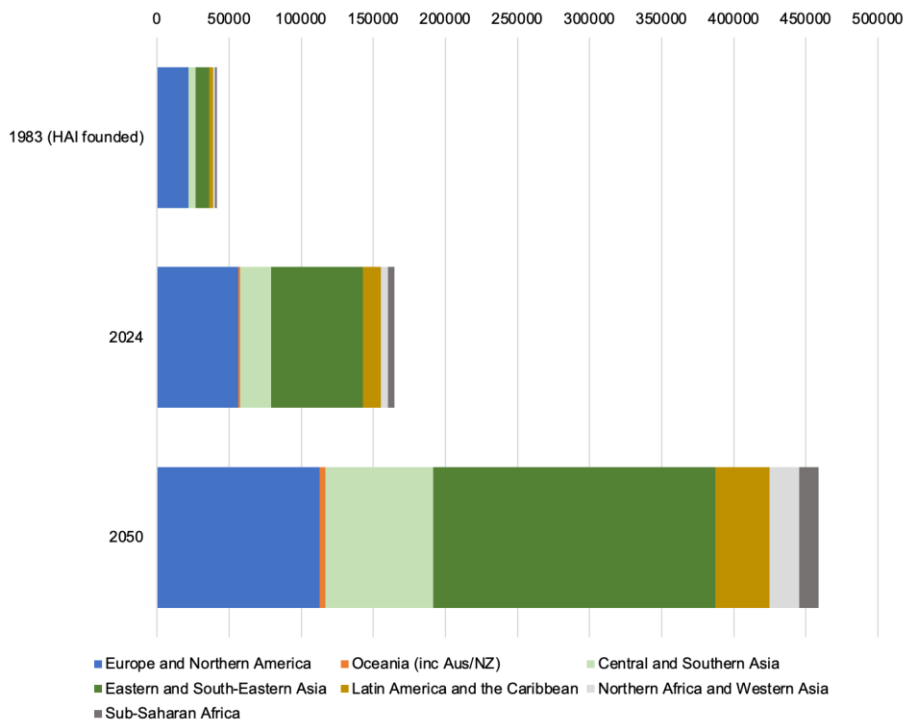
Secondly, in *absolute terms*, the growing size of the older population is a truly global phenomenon. Figure 1 shows the tremendous increase in the population aged 60/80 and above worldwide from the foundation of HelpAge International in 1983 to today and the projected increase to 2050. However, while Europe, North America, and Oceania accounted for 39.5% of the global population aged 60 and above in 1983, today, that number has declined to 25.6%. It is forecasted to decline further to 18.4% by 2050. Among the over 80 group, this shift is even more stark, where Europe, North America and Oceania accounted for 53.0% in 1983 compared to 35.0% today and 25.4% in 2050.

Figure 1: Population by UN regions aged (a) 60 and above and (b) 80 and above.
(UNPD 2022)

(a)



(b)



This, of course, is not new. HelpAge International, perhaps more than any other group, has been vocal in challenging both these stereotypes: the micro-characterisation of the vulnerable older person and the Euro/Anglocentric world view of the topic. The truly global work of the organisation has shone a light on the issues of older people in every corner of the world. Over the following decades, this message should continue to be made loudly and clearly: championing the rights and needs of older persons worldwide.

Population ageing or older persons in the population?

Here, though, lies one of the biggest challenges and issues relating to the way we think about populations. HelpAge International, the UN and various organisations around the world have worked tirelessly - and with some success - to change the perception of older persons around the world, through promoting rights, tackling ageism, and presenting a more positive view; although it is a moot point as to whether ageism has decreased over the past decades.

Yet, despite this there is now doubt that we are still stuck with this negative view of population ageing which is almost uniformly presented as a 'challenge' or even a 'crisis'. This has given birth to metaphors such as a 'silver tsunami' (Calasanti 2020) and a catalogue of popular books about the apocalyptic demographic future (see review in Coleman and Basten 2015). Both of which have fed into an ageist narrative and inevitably contribute to intergenerational hostility. Demographers, too, have nurtured this negative view of population ageing with the measures we use, not least the dreaded 'old age dependency ratio' which normally compares the number of 'older' people to those aged 20-64, but in doing so screams that older people are not only locked out of the labour force, but that they are reliant, *literally dependent* on it (Sanderson and Scherbov 2015).

I would argue that until we tackle head-on this issue of the negativity of population ageing, it will be impossible to truly transform the rights and roles of older persons in society. Over the next decades, this is where I truly believe organisations such as HelpAge International can make a transformational difference.

Firstly, though, we have to tackle one more myth head-on. In terms of the response, there has been much talk in the news and popular discourse in recent times of the need to boost the number of babies being born as a response to this perceived 'timebomb' of population ageing. Elsewhere, immigration is touted as a means of offsetting population ageing. In short, this means looking for a 'demographic solution' to a 'demographic problem'. However, neither of these 'solutions' are perfect, largely because of two basic tenets: babies do not work and migrants age. This means that any change in the size of the labour force brought about by pronatalism will not be felt for 20 years or so (by which time the world of work will likely be very different), and the migrants brought in to increase the labour force, if they stay, will themselves have become older and perhaps retired. (Also, let's not forget that such pronatalist policies can be incredibly expensive; they have not really worked anywhere they have been implemented; and they often go against globally agreed norms on reproductive rights).

No: there is no easy, two-dimensional response to population ageing. Rather, it requires a holistic, joined up approach which, in turn, requires completely rethinking the way we see it as a process.

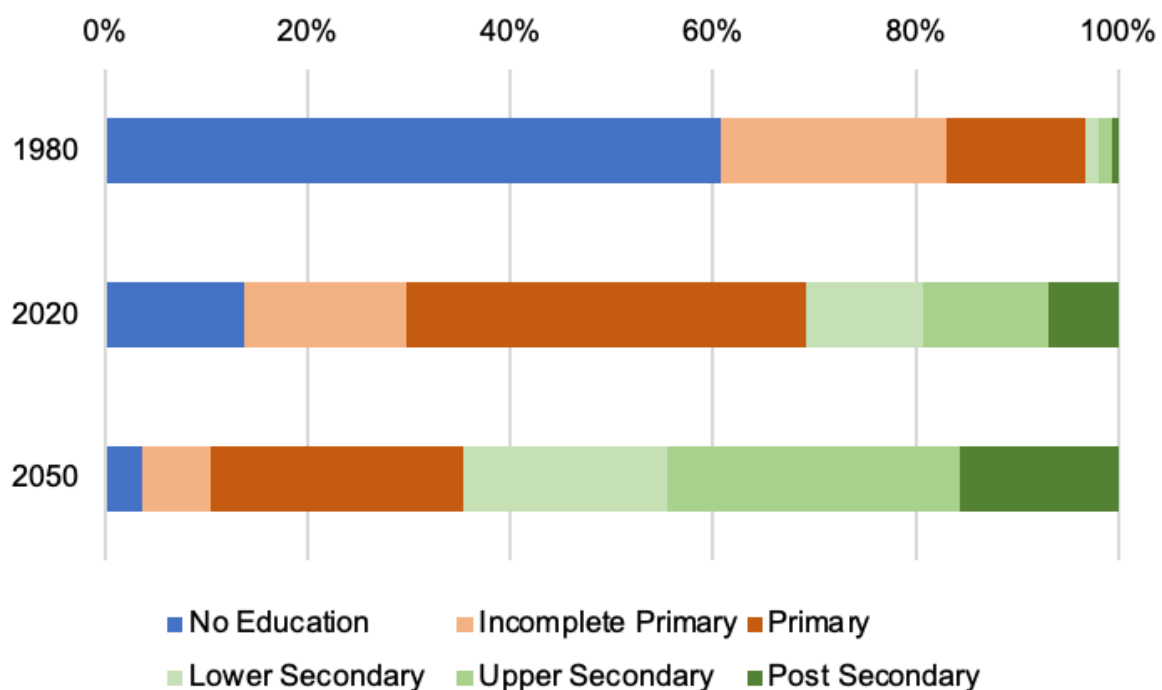
Responding to a paradigm shift

In the twentieth century, population growth - and usually rapid growth - was a universal phenomenon. It was an era of cheap labour; of rapid growth. In the current century, however, we have a much more demographically diversified world. True, many parts of the world still see rapid population growth especially among the younger populations. However, we also see a new demographic paradigm in many parts of the world of slow (or even negative) population growth and a drastic shift between the relative size of younger and older populations.

In the 'older, slower growth' world, there needs to be a matching paradigm shift with how we view people. This means acknowledging that the old, 20th century model of the exploitation of unlimited cheap labour (including unpaid domestic/care work) is simply no longer valid. In these seemingly demographically straitened times, the need to ensure that the full economic and social potential of every single person is realised becomes a matter of the utmost urgency. This requires re-examining the older population, and presenting it not as a 'dependent' group, but a dynamic one whose (potential) economic and social contributions simply cannot be overlooked or, for that matter, taken for granted.

Take South-East Asia, for example. This is one of the most rapidly ageing regions in the world and one where the ‘crisis’ of ageing is loudly heard. Between the formation of HelpAge International in the early 1980s and today, the population aged over 60 has more than tripled. Between today and 2050 it will almost triple again. However, as Figure 2 shows, this age transformation is matched by an education transformation too. In 1980, this older population was characterised by little or no formal education. Today, it is largely characterised by primary education, and by 2050 secondary education will be the norm. Furthermore, these figures should be taken as a *minimum* as they net of possible advances in lifelong learning (WIC 2018).

Figure 2: Educational attainment levels of population aged 60 and above, South-Eastern Asia.



However, this idea of two worlds - of slow and rapid population ageing and growth - it is something of a false dichotomy when it comes to policy responses. Of course, though, this is not (just) about working longer and increasing the pension age, but rather working and working *better*. Globally, this means discouraging age discrimination and providing job opportunities to older persons. It means recognising, and rewarding, the tremendous (largely) unpaid contribution of older persons (and women in particular) in the care sector. In parts of the world where the informal sector is prevalent and often effectively makes the idea of retirement obsolete for many, opportunities need to go beyond low-wage agricultural or service-sector work. It means adopting a much more flexible approach to the work transitions in later life and scrapping ‘hard’ retirement ages which force people out of the labour market. (As a corollary to this, it also means demographers should stop using ‘dependency ratios’ and rather fully adopt alternative measure of ageing which better capture both dynamic changes in health and longevity (Sanderson and Scherbov 2013, 2010) as well as the real nature of the generational economy (Lee and Mason 2012)).

In turn, opportunities for life-long learning can serve to negate the challenge of obsolete skills. Integrating work into active ageing programmes, and strengthening universally available health services and preventive care to address the rising incidence of noncommunicable diseases among older persons is critical. Technology too, can enhance the productivity of older persons and match them to jobs; though this requires initiatives to bridge the 'digital divide'. Age-friendly cities can create an environment which fosters continued social and economic contribution.¹ Social pensions and adequate income protection can prevent the slide into poverty.

Finally, of course, such an enabling society means not only more production, but also potentially more consumption. The so-called 'Second Demographic Dividend' can come about as a result of individuals with higher savings rates consuming in older age (Mason and Lee 2006). More broadly, though, a healthier, more (economically) active older population is one which may well be wealthier and more likely to purchase goods and services which are developed with specific needs and tastes in mind.

Population ageing as an intergenerational, life-course process

Recognising that ageing is a life-course process, though, this notion of advocating better work should not only be confined to older persons. This is where we have to look at the population age structure and the generational economy more broadly. Younger and middle-aged people today will be the older persons of the future. If we invest in their education, skills, and health, and if we can translate these human capital gains into decent employment within a rights-based, more equal society then we can safely assume that they will 'age better' than if we do not. Conventional wisdom also tells us that the younger the age we make these investments, the greater the return in older age.

However, while these younger people are the older persons of the future, they are also instrumental in shaping and responding to the economic and social challenges of population ageing today. In simple theoretical terms, in societies where there is the distribution of tax income from workers to non-workers (through, for example, pensions and long-term care systems), increasing the productivity of the worker and the workforce increases the resources available to spend on the non-worker. In the same way that there has been a human capital transformation of older persons (as discussed in the previous section), there has been a matching revolution at all younger ages. By releasing the full potential of all people, at all ages, can be the primary means of adapting to the inevitable fiscal and economic challenges that population ageing brings. This involves ensuring that all barriers to releasing this potential based not only on age, but also on gender, disability, sexuality or otherwise are broken down. To put it very bluntly, society simply cannot afford to continue to erect these barriers in this new demographic paradigm.

Collectively, this holistic, all-of-life approach can create a virtuous circle of improved human capital translated into labour force participation (including unpaid work) and better health at all ages which, in turn, would be conducive to offsetting some of the inevitable challenges of population ageing (such as financing healthcare, welfare systems) not only future economic

¹ <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/your-questions-answered-how-can-asia-manage-its-growing-population-older-workers>

growth and the cultivation of the Second Demographic Dividend, but also to improved individual and family wellbeing. To give a simple example, such an approach should be able to better support the development of adequate long-term care systems, while at the same time reducing the overall *need* for long-term care by ensuring health and wellbeing and ageing in place for as long as possible.

But can it be done?

There will be many who think the above is just a fantasy. That population ageing is inevitably bad for the economy. However, it is not too great an exaggeration to state that population ageing has driven some of the great economic success stories of the past few decades. Take China, South Korea, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Brazil for example. These are countries which have seen tremendous economic growth recently. Yet, what has happened to the median age of their populations over this time? Of course, it has increased significantly! Between the early 1980s and 2021, the median age of the population has increased in China from 21.1 to 37.9; South Korea from 22.2 to 43.4; Bangladesh from 16.4 to 26.3; Thailand from 20.0 to 39.3 and Brazil from 19.8 to 32.8. This was primarily brought about by a sharp drop in fertility rates. However, in the period before older age mortality rates fell and the number of older persons increased sharply (as they did in each of these settings), there was a so-called 'window of opportunity' where each country had (or, in the case of Bangladesh) a disproportionately large young and middle-aged population. These countries were able to translate these favourable demographic characteristics into rapid economic growth through industrialisation. This is the 'demographic dividend' (Mason, Lee, and Jiang 2016). However, this dividend was not automatic. It was also achieved through investments in human capital which enabled the translation into productivity (Lutz et al. 2019; Kotschy, Suarez Urtaza, and Sunde 2020).

Over the next decades, then, there must be a stronger focus on keeping this 'window of opportunity' as wide as possible, as open for as long as possible, whether in 'older' or 'younger' countries. As already discussed, this approach means re-envisioning the relationship between work and age systematically - going way beyond increasing the pension age. This means finding new ways to ensure that older people are engaged, active and healthy for as long as possible. But on the other hand, it means recognising that the key to meeting the challenges of population ageing in the medium- to long-term is to ensure that younger people are able to meet their full potential in life. It is hard to deny that there is a crisis in work among the young all around the world, where unemployment, informal work and NEET rates are far too high. This translates into a frustration with life in general which, in turn, can translate into intergenerational hostilities. In many parts of the world, limited economic prospects are leading to high rates of youth mobility and migration, with ensuing humanitarian risks.

But we can also learn the lessons of the past in a number of ways. Many of the systems we currently have in place which are most stressed by population ageing (such as pensions) of course need to be adapted and reformed. This is especially the case in Europe, North America and in other higher income countries. However, new (or nascent) systems should be built in a manner which makes them sustainable, flexible and resilient to future demographic changes.

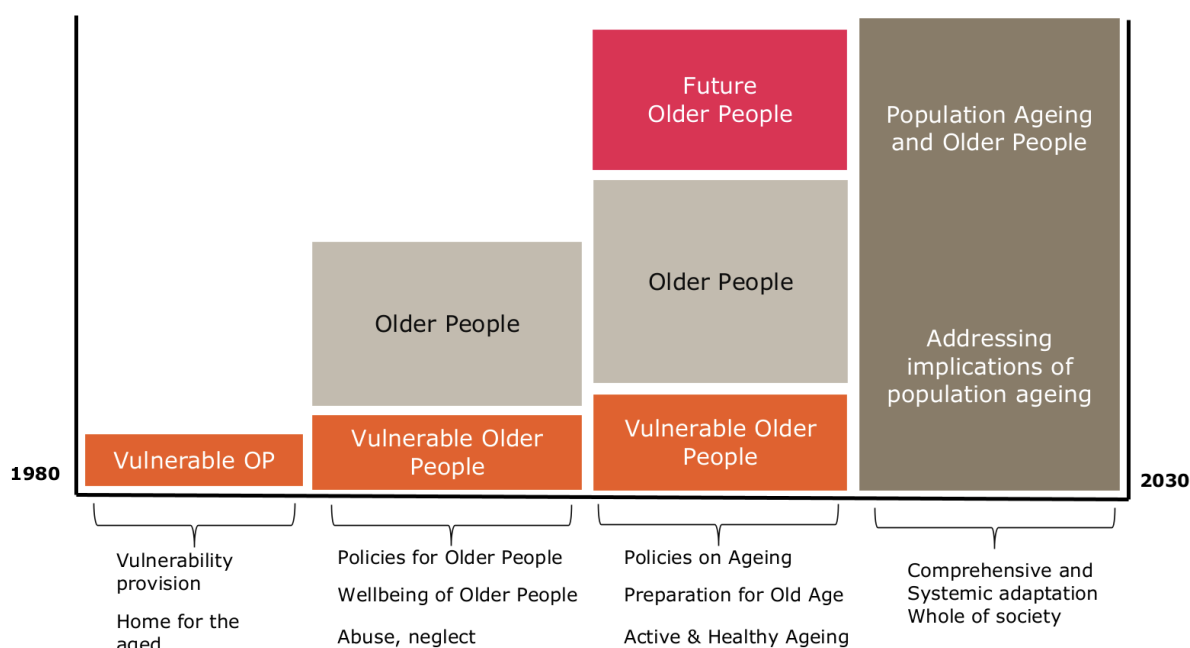
On the other hand, we also have much to learn from those countries who have aged rapidly more recently. Over the next decades, the favourable characteristics presented by the demographic dividend will start to spread to ever more countries of the world, especially in middle- and lower income countries. The countries which have gone through demographic dividend in recent decades (some of whom are named above) have, arguably, not always done so in an equitable manner and in a forward-thinking way. In each case, ageing (and its consequences), but also more general human-centred support has been something of an afterthought, leaving to challenges which have emanated further down the line. Furthermore, this economic growth has not always been inclusive nor rights-based, effectively locking many people out of the shared growth for their entire lives, leading to poverty and the prospect of ageing poorly. Indeed, in the worst cases, the favourable demographic circumstances have been entirely squandered due to poor governance and the lack of job-rich, inclusive growth. We simply must ensure that the next phase of global population ageing is one which is as inclusive as possible.

A call to action

Figure 3 gives an interpretation of how the priorities of the organisation have changed over time. In the first two columns, we see how this has been implemented through, at first, advocating for vulnerable older persons and then more broadly in advocating for policy provisions for well-being for older persons and countering neglect and abuse. ***To be very clear, all of these activities will continue to be of critical importance in the next decades and should be supported and reinforced.***

Figure 3: Strategic foci of HelpAge International, 1980-2030?²

² Eduardo Klien. Population ageing and the situation of older people. What is it for HelpAge? Presentation, 2023



More recently, as the third column in Figure 3 shows, there has been the development of a more general focus on 'future older people', with a new emphasis on policies for ageing, preparation for older age and active/healthy ageing. Again, this avenue of work is of critical importance.

In terms of how we think about all three of these areas - vulnerable older people, older people more generally and future older people' - HelpAge International and other organisations have played a transformational role. However, at the start of 2024, we are still 'stuck' with this negative stereotype of population ageing as a process and, frankly, of older persons in general as 'dependent'. Over the next few decades, unless something drastic changes, it is hard to see how these negative views will not become amplified and spread further across countries of the world that are going (and going to go) through the process of population ageing. **Tackling both of these interlinked issues must be our shared priority over the next decades.**

As far as changing the stereotype of dependency is concerned, a continuation of the programmes and policies of the past will not be enough. We may have convinced many people of the argument that older people are not dependent, contribute enormously to society and are a key to social and economic development in the future. However, we must be honest and say that not everyone is won over - especially politicians and economists who appear to be uniformly negative about population ageing and, by association, the economic and social role of older persons (which, in turn, leads to ageism and the inability to transform societal views of older people). In order to truly liberate, then, this means we have to integrate this narrative about what older people are - and what and where they will be over the next decades - into the broader view of how populations age.

Some things are easy wins. As already mentioned, demographers have to stop using outdated and irrelevant concepts such as 'dependency' and irrelevant, chronological boundaries to older age. Also, if I may be extremely frank, I do not think the name *HelpAge* helps, as it can reinforce a negative stereotype, even a form of 'compassionate ageism' (Binstock 2010)?

At the moment, as far as I know, no organisation, including in the UN system, is taking the lead globally on arguing for the need for a systematic adaptation to population ageing. Adding the reframing of the entire narrative surrounding population ageing to its existing strategic goals could be a truly transformative role for HelpAge International and other organisations over the next decades.

This would require a much more systematic and holistic view of what 'age' means, and encompassing an all-of-society, all-age approach. As for the specifics, of course, this is not for me to say. It could require lobbying for population ageing to be a part of local and national development plans. It could entail being a co-ordinating group to work with civil society interest across the life-course. It could mean taking a lead in financial literacy and life-course financial planning; or inclusive job growth for all; or lifelong learning. It could be achieved through convening key actors and players; thought leadership; being proactive in challenging the prevailing narrative regarding population ageing in policy and the media; promoting new measures of ageing, the generational economy and poverty. Whatever it is, and however it is done, it will have to involve an all-of-society, all-age approach.

Now, it might seem counterintuitive for organisations such as HelpAge International and organisations primarily associated with older persons to concern itself with youth unemployment or even policies to ensure that the voices of adolescents are heard. However, as argued above, not only are the young and middle-aged the older persons of the future, but they are also the ones who will shape the economic, social and political lives of older persons living today. Of course, such an approach is not quite as counterintuitive as it seems. Intergenerational engagement and justice has long been a feature of the work of HelpAge and many other similar organisations³, while mentoring and reverse mentoring is a common feature of many workplaces.

Conclusion

Before closing, I just want to quickly turn to another 'megatrend' which is often presented in a similarly existential way to population ageing: climate change, or more precisely, the climate crisis.

It has become abundantly clear over the years that the major decision makers of the world do not particularly care much about the habitats of animals which are going to go extinct, or the ice caps melting, or climate-induced migration (until it reaches their shores, of course).

³ Indeed, such counterintuition can be seen in other policy areas. In many countries with very low fertility rates, it could be argued that investing in better support for older persons to live independently can free up the burden of care placed on young parents which, in turn, can be a means of supporting the wellbeing of children and supporting the reproductive aspirations of their parents .

A few months ago, however, I went to the COP28 in Dubai. For the first time, it really struck me how all of the talk about the 'green economy' has actually translated into a kind of reality. Part of the reason for this is that many of those concerned about the state of the natural world have changed the way they talk about it. More precisely, they have looked at the issues in a different way, and presented it in a way which has captured the attention of the big decision makers, forcing them to make, or at least consider, making radical changes.

Consider the African Elephant. Of course, most people like elephants and would like to see them thrive and be resilient to effects of climate change. However, many other people might say, well, so what. However, when the IMF declared that 'The increase in carbon storage caused by forest elephant activity is huge—as well as valuable', and that 'if the population of African forest elephants returned to its former size and they recovered their former range, it would increase carbon capture by 13 metric tons (1 metric ton = 1,000 kg) per hectare (10,000 square metres)' then more people started to take notice (IMF 2020).

I am not equating population ageing to climate change, and I am certainly not equating older persons to the African Elephant! (In fact, much of the green economy is arguably pretty exploitative). However, I am simply trying to make the point that one of the only ways to get the big decision-makers to listen and make radical changes is to talk about their language and point out what might be in it for them.

It is wonderful that humans are living longer, but this should not fool us into thinking that population ageing is without its challenges. On the other hand, we must do everything in our power to prevent the apocalyptic view of population ageing becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Population ageing is just something that has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen. How we respond to it will affect all of us today and in the future. But it will also affect global economic growth, the prospects of politicians and the pockets of shareholders. It offers us an unprecedented opportunity to reshape our societies for the better. But to do so we need to act now, to be bold, and to consider the long-term implications of our decisions.

Global humanity is stacked with potential, much, if not most of which is unrealised. Armed with more than a century of experience from all kinds of places from around the world, we should be able to share knowledge, ideas and innovation to not only cope with population ageing but actually turn it into a genuine opportunity for inclusive growth. This, though, needs a new narrative that HelpAge International, its partners and civil society groups across all age groups could bring over the next decades.

In this new narrative, the society we build must be an inclusive one. Our healthcare systems must pivot from treating illness to promoting wellness throughout life, and prioritise mental health, mobility, and the social aspects of health that keep life not only long but worth living. These changes are not only policy changes but also cultural changes such as reshaping attitudes towards aging, work, and community. This can ensure that the world we are ageing into is prepared for the wealth of years its citizens will bring.

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