

Book review

The AGEING & DEVELOPMENT report. Poverty, independence and the world's older people

A HelpAge International report

Edited by: Judith Randel, Tony German and Deborah Ewing

Published by Earthscan, London, 1999, pp. 200

This volume is a timely reminder of the significance of global ageing for the new millennium. The report has a strong message: Poverty and exclusion remain the greatest threats to the well-being of older people all over the world. Both the rights and the contributions of older people need to be recognised. Most older people are not only resourceful survivors but are supporting the fabric and well-being of their families and communities. The best way to improve the lot of older people in developing countries is to enhance their coping strategies so that they continue to contribute to household and society. In this way older people become part of the development solution rather than a social burden to society. In short, the report argues that targeting the most disadvantaged, namely older people and older women in particular, is indeed a good development strategy.

The report draws on case studies from around the world to illustrate best practice in the provision of family support and community participation in development projects. Many of these vignettes are supplied by members of HelpAge International, as is the charming photographic material, which depicts positive images of engaged older persons.

The report may be seen as a companion volume to recent development reports produced by international agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. In many passages, readers are made to think that this volume is a rejoinder and update on the World Bank's 1994 report on *Averting the old age crisis*. The *AGEING & DEVELOPMENT* report has similar layout and format aimed to appeal to a wide readership. The boxes of illustrations are eye-catching and worth reading on their own. Some are written by recognised experts who have summed up insights of many years of research for readers' benefits. The volume is carefully edited. Although there is no index, the detailed list of contents serves this purpose well for a reference work.

Contents

The volume is divided in four parts:

Part 1 gives an introduction to ageing and development. It covers the rights of older people, livelihoods, gender, capability, health, coping strategies, economic security and family life. An unusual contribution in this section focuses on

"invisible" older people, who are displaced persons living in the conflict flashpoints on the globe, and shares thoughts on best practice when working with older refugees.

Part 2 is devoted to regional and country reports in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and Eastern and Central Europe

Part 3, entitled "Ageing and development data," gives report cards on how well nations around the world are addressing ageing and development issues. The national policies on ageing of 46 countries are reviewed in a descriptive table with four headings. Consistent with the report's advocacy of popular consultation, the last heading gives information on the involvement of civil society in policy formation. A second review identifies the status of ageing in development co-operation. Some 18 donor countries and seven international agencies, including the World Bank and the World Health Organisation, are reviewed. Annotated tables and charts on global ageing and ageing trends in the developing world are given in a last chapter.

Part 4, the reference section, contains the United Nations' Principles for Older Persons, a brief description of the development activities of HelpAge International and its membership, and a list of acronyms and abbreviations.

Recurrent themes

There are several recurring themes in the book worth mentioning. These include the short-sightedness of social exclusion of older persons, the durability of family support in spite of modernization, the need for best practice at all levels to reinforce the capability of older persons rather than their dependence, and the need to view global ageing as a unique challenge and opportunity rather than a threat. These themes are briefly reviewed below.

- **Social exclusion** has so far been overlooked in the field of ageing. According to contributor Amanda Heslop, social exclusion provides a significant contribution to the development of a research and policy framework on ageing and development. Support for older people as part of comprehensive provision for all vulnerable groups has a huge po-

tential pay-off. For example, Alex Kalache and Kasturi Sen point out that healthy older people are enabled to continue to contribute positively to society instead of simply being receivers (p.64). According to contributor Schulz, aged poverty mirrors the general poverty of nations as a whole, with its rural character and its feminine preponderance. In many parts of the world, poverty in old age is simply the last phase in a lifetime of deprivation. Therefore a life course perspective on ageing must advocate social inclusion at all stages of life to pre-empt problems of old age.

- **Family support.** Typically, the breakdown of the extended family and loss of respect for older people are ascribed to modernization. Modernization is often cited as the overarching cause of the problems of contemporary elders. In contrast, *The AGEING & DEVELOPMENT report* argues that impoverishment in ageing may be a common, cross-cultural experience of the ageing process, rather than simply resulting from modernization (see box, p.5). The report notes that the most rational form of old-age support remains family support. It is the most widely used survival strategy for older people. For instance, research conducted in Southeast Asia shows that co-residence of elders with children should remain viable for at least a generation.

Contrary to popular opinion the extended family still has an important role to play. Although the extended family format is changing, under pressure it still recognises its responsibilities to its members, even if it is not able to fulfil them (p.99).

- **Capability and resilience of older people.** It is noted that many developing countries see old age to begin at the point when active contribution is no longer possible. Data in Part 3 show that in developing countries, substantial percentages and even majorities of older people are economically active (p.191). It is argued that older people are characteristically eager to make an effective contribution to household survival, therefore support with basic needs, health care, credit and skills training will by extension support families and communities.

Many contributors speak of the double or triple vulnerability of older persons in the demographic and health transitions. In the area of health, older persons face the double burden of traditional communicable diseases associated with poor living conditions and diseases associated with ageing. While developed countries became rich before they aged, developing countries are now ageing at unprecedented speed, while most of their populations are living in poverty (p.62). Women are particularly vulnerable. However, they are not inherently vulnerable; gender inequality is built into society's economic, social and political systems. Therefore, Deborah Ewing argues: Too strong a focus on the extreme vulnerability of women in old age only serves to obscure the indispensable contribution of women to the development process *despite* that vulnerability.

- **Global ageing as challenge and opportunity.** Two main thrusts are woven into the narrative and tables. First, the demographic transition is unstoppable, therefore it is better to confront the issue and place it on the development agenda. By 2050 the percentage of people over 60 will exceed that of those under 15 in the world, including developing countries (see p.180). Second, by endorsing their rights and supporting their capabilities, older people can make a positive contribution to development. If the na-

tions are indeed intent on reducing poverty in the world, as goals cited in Part 3 (see p.174) suggest, then it makes good sense to engage the elderly in the development process.

Putting people first

Writing on economic security, contributor James H. Schulz wryly notes that while there has been little interest in older people, there has been a great deal of interest in pensions in the developing countries. *The AGEING & DEVELOPMENT report* clearly puts people first when discussing a development agenda which seeks to harness the capabilities of older people. Not surprisingly, HelpAge International receives (one supposes unsolicited) praise from authors Alex Kalache and Kasturi Sen for its non-patronising approach, respect of the realities of the local situation and its effective use of limited resources. In their view, HelpAge International acts "as a model for anyone interested in the well-being of elderly people in developing countries" (p.67).

Readership

The report will appeal to a wide variety of readers ranging from academics, policy makers, planners, practitioners and community organisations, among others. The volume is fun to read. Arguments are backed up with quotable facts and figures and vignettes on policy and practice in many countries around the world. Many vignettes are based on the rich experiences of organisations associated with HelpAge International. Text is interspersed with boxes which allow brief excursions into topics as varied as the threat of witchcraft to older women in Tanzania and population projections based on China's one-child policy. The appendix contains nicely packaged facts and figures which will serve as ready reference material for policy makers, planners and non-governmental organisations.

Of particular interest to southern African readers

The idea of a gender-sensitive, affirmative-action programme for older people is likely to strike a chord with South African readers who are justifiably proud of their new constitution and Bill of Rights which stress equality for all. It is certainly true that older women of South Africa, the majority of whom are black, have suffered the accumulated effects of a lifetime of social exclusion during the apartheid years. Despite its potential for abuse, South Africa's universal pension system is cited as a positive example of reinforcing capability which allows older women, in particular, to continue to play an important role in the maintenance of household economies (p.19). The last country report might be singled out as of particular interest to African readers in that it affords rare insights into how older and poor people are experiencing problems of economic transition in Eastern and Central Europe. Intriguingly, there are parallels between the coping strategies of older Eastern Europeans and older African people under structural adjustment.

Hard-sell approach

From a social indicator perspective, all social reports tend to be normative, even those presenting only statistics. However, some reports tend to be more subtly normative than others by letting "the data speak for themselves" (cf. Vogel, 1994). *The AGEING & DEVELOPMENT report* is not content to let the facts speak for themselves. It spells out its declared policy message lest it might be misunderstood. The text is prefaced with "The message" and "Action points," and the first chapter sums up the main message again. By the time readers have

reached page 20, they should be convinced that it is essential to include older people in the global development effort if it is not to fail.

A reference work for the future

In the interest of accessibility, there is quite a bit of redundancy which may irritate some readers. Others may feel that they are becoming better acquainted with the report's arguments and facts as they progress through their reading. For readers with little time at their disposal, the first article by Gorman on the rights of older people doubles as an excellent resume of the book. It gives a quick ride through the main arguments and the descriptive back-up material. The summary of the report in circulation also does a good job of presenting *The AGEING & DEVELOPMENT report's* message. However, readers of abridged versions will miss out on perhaps the most useful section of the report. The quantitative

data on ageing and development and the policy reviews will allow students of development to assess progress made in including older people in the development agenda in years to come.

Reference

Vogel, J. 1994. Social indicators and social reporting. *Statistical Journal of the United Nations*, ECE 11: 241-260.

Valerie Møller

Professor
Institute for Social and Economic Research
Rhodes University
P O Box 94
6140 Grahamstown
South Africa
E-mail: v.moller@ru.ac.za