

## **Introduction**

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# **Taking steps: an African ageing agenda**

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This special issue of *SAJG* on "The family and ageing in Africa" marks yet another step in the annals of the African Gerontological Society (AGES). The first major step was taken in December 1993 when the society held its first workshop in Accra, Ghana to discuss an agenda on ageing. The results of the workshop were published under the title *Effective responses to ageing in Africa by the year 2000* (Apt, Bester & Insley, 1995). Twenty years ago it would have been an impossible task to assemble African scientists and social welfare practitioners to discuss the subject of ageing. Very little researched information existed then and many African governments were likely to assert that ageing was no problem in their country. Even in the 1980s a great deal of scepticism existed in Africa about the need for African gerontology research. Today, and taking a cue from the deliberations of the first AGES workshop, there is no country in our region that is not confronted with the negative impacts of development and urbanization as their country charts its route towards modernization. Even though an ageing agenda still has a low profile on the economic desks of many African governments, the realisation that there are indeed difficulties to be overcome regarding the care of elderly people in Africa is widespread.

### **Responding to the African reality**

Global ageing is real, and the pace and patterns of population ageing in developing countries are without precedent. Of the fifty countries in the world which are projected to have elderly populations greater than two million by the year 2025, approximately half are developing countries and seven of these are in the African region. More people in Africa will reach the age of 60 years, and having reached that age will live longer than people before them. Ironically, longevity is gaining momentum in Africa about the same time that the family is losing a grip over its caring responsibilities.

Different scenarios of care for the elderly are emerging in Africa. Economic uncertainties mean that many individuals who survive to old age face a longer life of economic deprivation without social support. The current orthodoxy that family size should be reduced in developing countries impacts on the structure of the extended family and its role as a social welfare agency. To advocate a reduction in family size, when in most African countries there is little chance that an old

person will receive social security support from any other agency, is problematic. How developing societies arrange care for the elderly – and the young for that matter, where family size is severely restricted, has not been addressed in the literature. Yet it is clearly a crucial question which should be dealt with in any programme or policy concerned with the design of appropriate programmes for the welfare of the ageing. Conversely, to ignore social changes and to persist in outdated expectations regarding family care, is to put both the elderly and their families at great disadvantage and potentially at great risk.

Given the structural changes which are taking place, it is clear that aiming for social policies which mirror those of the West is a mistaken direction. However, to evade or to neglect the development and design of appropriate welfare philosophy and practice is also a substantial policy error. The choice is not simply one of a Western model or nothing (United Nations, 1987). Recent literature (e.g. Besley, Coate & Loury, 1993), building upon earlier but neglected anthropological research (Ardener, 1964), has identified indigenous informal social support arrangements in Africa and elsewhere which extend beyond the more traditional arrangements of kin and clan, though kin and clan still play their role in these arrangements.

### **The challenge for AGES**

Untested assumptions cannot meet the challenges posed by the African reality. Information to support policy development is a growing need in African gerontology. Knowledge is indeed a fundamental condition for any form of advancement. In order to face the challenges inherent in ageing in our changing societies, we need to develop a mechanism of support to African countries as they search for ways to manage social change. Through what better means can this be achieved than through the provision of knowledge? Economic development for Africa, it seems clear, cannot proceed without more detailed and systematic policy thinking on social resource constraints, welfare needs, priorities and arrangements, not least because of the imminence of demographic changes. The opportunity to assist in the design of forms of social support systems that are appropriate for Africa should not be lost.

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In this special issue of *SAJG* – which is at the same time a first journal issue for AGES, made possible by the HSRC/UCT Centre for Gerontology – we are dealing with the subject of “family,” fully acknowledging the importance of the family to Africa’s ageing but still being aware that the time has arrived for the design of policies which support the African family rather than destroy it.

Møller and Devey, and Adamchak draw on secondary data sources from national accounts to examine the situation of families in South Africa and Namibia. These countries are exceptional in Africa in that they offer formal welfare provision for the elderly in the form of a national pension system.

To inform intergenerational welfare policy, Møller and Devey compare the situation of black South African households with persons aged 60 years and older, with households that include only younger members. Their analysis raises questions about the rural and urban linkages between households that provide elder care and those that do not, and the dynamics of household formation around older persons with pensions. Møller and Devey recommend support of rural families living below the poverty line to enhance the welfare and wellbeing of the elderly.

In this vein, Adamchak examines the roles of elderly Namibian pensioners and how the security which pensions offers them enables them to take charge of households and the care of grandchildren while young adults search for gainful employment. His findings pose a number of researchable questions. For example: Does a national pension system alter long established trends in intergenerational transfers by allowing the older generation to continue to provide support for the young rather than becoming recipients of support? Does this process bring larger economic gains to these households in the long run because of the security of the national pension?

And where there are no pensions, how do the elderly manage to survive? In a country where very few elderly people have access to pensions, Apt, Koomson, Williams and Grieco examine an indigenous pension arrangement of elderly Ghanaian women traders. Doorstep trading provides elderly women with a social identity and a social role which contributes towards their wellbeing. This social arrangement may be on a decline and social welfare policy should incorporate informal arrangements such as this one.

In her paper Peil argues that modern “development” is likely to increase Africa’s resources and therefore the family’s ability to provide more help for the elderly. This development model is debatable judging by present trends. She recommends that while Africa waits for government welfare programmes to develop, it is well to measure the variability of family help received by elders as such information can help governments and NGO’s to target those most in need.

How relevant are funerals to aged care? Are they a recognizable form of care provided to old people after death? Van der Geest explores this theme in conversations with elderly people in Ghana and attempts to understand the meaning of funerals to the family and older people themselves.

### Ageing: the way forward?

Broadly, the papers in this issue argue that the Western retirement model is not appropriate for the circumstances of Africa’s elderly and that there is a clear need for the development of intergenerational welfare policies to address Africa’s ageing problems. It is important that social welfare thinking be directed towards ensuring the continued centrality of the problems in social and economic life. Such attention must focus on providing enhanced support for the indigenous arrangements which have helped protect this group in the past, as well as focus on generating new modern arrangements designed to protect the elderly under the present arrangements.

The challenge is ours to explore the way forward in terms of intergenerational social welfare policy and identifying action points on the way to this goal.

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