

Older people in community development

The role of older people's associations (OPAs) in enhancing local development



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The world is ageing fast

In a few decades humanity is going to go through a dramatic irreversible demographic change. By 2050 people over 60 will outnumber those under 14; a staggering two-thirds of these older people will live in Asia. Such demographic changes have enormous implications for our societies.

Older people are an asset to their families, communities and society. Their contribution – as carers, advisers, mediators, mentors and breadwinners – is invaluable, but frequently unrecognised. Harnessing and nurturing such capacities through older people's associations has proven to be a decisive contribution to development theory and practice.

“There is no subject of greater importance than the ageing of the population and provision of social protection for older people. It affects the very nature of our societies and concerns not only older people, but all sections of the population.”

Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel Prize winner and former Chief Economist of the World Bank

What are OPAs?

Older people’s associations (OPAs) are innovative community-based organisations of older people, aimed at improving the living conditions for older people and for developing their communities. OPAs utilise the unique resources and skills older people have, to provide effective social support, to facilitate activities and deliver services. The success of the OPAs can be attributed to:

- Their members, older people, are widely respected and have a wealth of community knowledge and experience.
- Older people tend to remain in their communities, providing continuity to the OPA and its activities, thus contributing to the sustainability of the organisation.
- The wider community members have a vested interest in the success of the OPA – the OPA benefits the community as a whole and people see themselves as future members of the associations.

“Older people can work and produce and contribute to their families. Sometimes all they need is a little support to be able to work”

Sultan Singh, OPA leader, Rajasthan, India

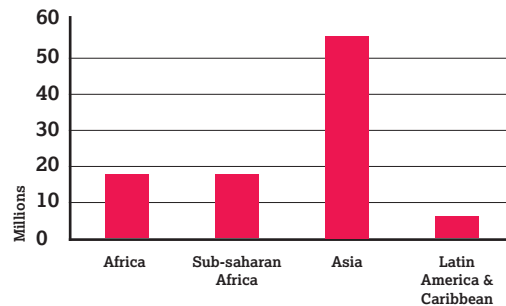
How do OPAs enhance local development?

OPAs work closely with local authorities and with a wide range of community members, enabling them to make a positive contribution in the following areas:

1. Building livelihood security

Older people tend to be affected by poverty more than other age groups. Despite their own poverty and vulnerability, older people play an important role in alleviating family and community poverty. OPAs have helped older people to access micro-credit, livelihood grant schemes, and job training leading to income generating activities, thus helping them earn enough money to support themselves and their families.

Figure 1: Number of people aged 60 and over living on less than US\$1* a day



* Measurement of poverty as defined by The World Bank, 2008

Poverty alleviation in rural China

OPAs in China have proven to be effective in supporting older people’s economic activities through revolving loan funds and training such as agriculture and animal husbandry. Results of the livelihood activities from 12 OPAs included:

- Distribution of loans to a total of 3,682 older men and women
- Average increase in participants household income of 23 per cent in a little over 2 years
- 99 per cent rate of loan repayment
- 65 per cent of participants reported using profits to purchase a wider variety of foods, improving nutrition

Income generating activities in Battambang, Cambodia

Small start-up grants and vocational training supported by HelpAge International, have helped some of the poorest older people in Cambodia participate in income generating activities. OPA members have been trained in new skills suited to their physical capacity such as livestock raising, or establishing food stalls and small shops.

Additional business skills training has helped participants quadruple their profits since the project start up. Monthly incomes from activities in Preak Chdor village now average 248,812khr (\$62) – a healthy wage for the area.

“To allow for a more equitable development process, disadvantaged stakeholders need to be empowered to increase their level of knowledge, influence and control over their own livelihoods, including development initiatives affecting them.”

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2005

“Since so many of the older people in Jia La Village are poor, many people need the support.... Without the loan from the OPA, I would not have been able to purchase the cows. I am now happy, and I hope to be able to give back to OPAs and community.”

Li Zhi Min, 60, Member of Jia La Village OPA, China

2. Improving healthcare

“Ageing is a development issue. Healthy older persons are a resource for their families, their communities and the economy”

Brasilia Declaration on Healthy Ageing,
World Health Organization, 1996

Lack of access to basic medical care is a fundamental problem faced by many older people. As people become older there is a need for good nutrition, exercise and mental stimulation to delay the onset and lessen the impact of chronic diseases.

OPAs throughout the region have been instrumental in:

- organising medical check-ups, promoting healthy living strategies and providing health education for older people
- linking with local health centres to take better care of older people such as conducting home visits, shortening waiting time in clinics
- providing training on home and community care to take care of lonely older people and those with mobility issues; reducing isolation and loneliness
- providing education to local residents on HIV and AIDS, on how to protect themselves and how to care for their sick children

“I believe the health habits of older people have changed as a result of this project, with a reduction in smoking and drinking. This has been possible through the health assessments and education sessions; and, another big change is that older people are less timid about consulting the village health practitioners and doctors.”

Zhang Yu, Director of the Health Bureau,
Baoping County, Sichuan Province, China



Fully trained volunteers from 15 OPAs in Cambodia provide homecare services for 111 frail and poor older people, and assistance to access primary healthcare services. Similarly, in the Philippines 80 OPAs have co-ordinated volunteer-based homecare services for more than 600 older people.

Following OPA health and nutrition activities and training in rural China, 40 per cent of participants now have better nutritional habits with 80 per cent reporting that they had adopted healthy habits (changed diet, exercised more, disposed of waste properly, or drinking), 10 per cent reporting they had quit smoking.

Different names, Same principles

Older people's association (OPA)	: Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka
Self-help group (SHG)	: India
Older citizen's monitoring group (OCM)	: Bangladesh
Elderly's club	: Thailand, Vietnam
Older people's group (OPG)	: Lao PDR
Older people's self help group (OPSHG)	: Myanmar
Older people's community (OPC)	: Republic of Korea
Older people's organisations (OPO)	: Phillipines

*“The health of older people has improved;
they have better knowledge of hygiene and nutrition and they have more
resources for eating a healthier diet.”*

In Saman, Member of an OPA in Battambang, Cambodia

Older people are shouldering a growing burden as the incidence of HIV infection increases rapidly in Vietnam. **Empathy clubs for older people affected by HIV and AIDS** in Vietnam encourage the active involvement of members to develop practical initiatives to address their needs. These include promoting homecare, raising community awareness and training on HIV prevention, promoting health check-ups and self-care, visiting sick members and providing livelihood activities such as microcredit loans and training. 67 clubs currently operate in four provinces and their work has resulted in:

- reduced HIV and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination within communities
- increased access to treatment and support for affected family members
- increased access to regular income
- policy change at national level through advocacy work undertaken by the clubs

3. Promoting participation in community life

OPAs across the region aim to promote mutual support among older people, reducing their isolation and vulnerability by creating social support networks that can facilitate community development activities. The OPA approach utilises the skills and experiences of older people to enable them to help themselves and their communities through ‘area specific’ activities.

OPAs **empower** older people, particularly older women, who account for the majority of the OPA members. Benefits include:

- mutual support and friendship with other members improving emotional well-being
- sharing of burdens, and group resolution of problems that face families and communities
- organisation of celebrations and religious ceremonies, arranged locally, avoiding the need to travel long distances to attend
- support when members are sick, experiencing financial hardship or during emergencies

***Mutual support
and friendship***

***improve emotional
wellbeing in old age***



“I feel women when given a chance in such activities as part of the participatory process of planning and executing, they are instrumental in bringing change and success.”

Ragini Sahay, Social Anthropologist, New Delhi, India

Increased knowledge and **confidence** amongst members encourage older people to mentor others and transfer knowledge and skills that can assist younger people in such areas as agriculture, health, and water and sanitation. This in turn, raises the positive profile of older people within communities and strengthens intergenerational bonds.

“I haven’t missed a meeting since this club was established two years ago. We keep coming back not only because of the clubs vocational training lessons, but also the joyful atmosphere. Together, we escape from the sad stories of real life to engage in doing new things. It’s like kindergarten for us”.

Nguyen Thi Mua, 64, Member of Tinh Tuy OPA, Vietnam

Participation of older women in India

Older women find in the OPAs a channel to participate in an unhibited manner. In the region of Rajasthan, India, there is a history of child marriage, purdah, feudalism and female infanticide, resulting in oppressive social conditions for women. Women continue to live in some of the most oppressive social conditions in rural India, indeed rural Asia.

Recognising this, the Village Older People’s Associations (VOPAs) formed female self-help groups (SHGs). So far the success of these SHGs include the management of saving schemes; encouraging women to put themselves forward to leadership roles, and increasing school enrolment of girls and sterilisation for birth control.

“The change in women’s attitude and participation in community life is particularly noteworthy.”

EC Monitoring Report, Assimilated Development of Older People in the Thar Desert project (ADOPT), India

4. Promoting participatory governance

OPAs across the region, play a vital role in raising awareness of the **rights and entitlements of older people** and improving their access to existing services. Linking up with government service providers enables OPA members to recognise that government departments are resources for them to utilise. This builds confidence amongst older people and articulation in expressing their specific needs.



By 2050 people over 60 will outnumber those under 14; a staggering two thirds of these older people will live in Asia.

‘Participation in civic associations builds social capital which in turn creates networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit... Life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital.’

Robert Putnam, Harvard University

Older Citizens Monitoring (OCM) – Bangladesh

In two areas of Bangladesh OPAs have been involved in Older Citizen’s Monitoring (OCM) to monitor the government delivery of policy commitments and to sensitise implementers and policy makers to influence and improve the implementation of policy for the well-being of vulnerable older people.

Successes of the OPAs include a 39 per cent increase in the number of older people accessing old age allowances and increased access to free (or reduced cost) health services for older people.

5. Supporting disaster response

Natural and man-made disasters, such as heat-waves, floods, droughts, and earthquakes are causing increasing human suffering, great loss of life and financial loss each year.

OPAs supported by HelpAge International and partners employ disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities such as disaster preparation, early warning systems, and relief and rehabilitation.

Older people are respected sources of knowledge in their communities, providing information on traditional coping mechanisms and/or their experiences of previous disasters, which is invaluable as part of preparedness planning.

“Before we just waited for death. Now we feel we can do something to help vulnerable people.”

OPA member, Bangladesh

Indian Ocean tsunami – Aceh, Indonesia

An estimated 14,000 people aged over 60 died when the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Indonesia in 2004. 93,000 older people were displaced. Many older people lost their relatives, homes and possessions. Others have become the main carers of grandchildren orphaned by the disaster. HelpAge International and its partners provided food, drinking water, shelter and medicines helping over 20,000 older people. OPAs were instrumental in rehabilitation activities such as rebuilding livelihoods. Cash grants were distributed by self-managed OPAs to over 2,000 of the poorest older people in Aceh, enabling them to regain a steady income to provide for their families basic needs.



**Once I
was one**

**but now we
are many**

‘Experience shows that targeting older people as direct beneficiaries is a very effective way to make older people’s needs and capacities more visible, promote intergenerational solidarity and empower older people.’

Older people in Aceh, Indonesia 18 months after the tsunami,
HelpAge International, 2006

“The older people’s association has been a great help to me and my family by providing a cash grant to help us establish a livelihood.”

Hinhihmina, 84, received a grant to open a local shop with her daughter in Matara, Sri Lanka

Emergency flood relief response – Rajasthan, India

The drought-impacted state of Rajasthan in India suffered severe floods in the monsoon months of 2006, affecting 5,809 villages in 10 districts of the state. Thousands of people lost their homes and all belongings; 75,000 animals lost their lives and 75 per cent of the crops were washed away.

In communities with a Village Older People’s Associations (VOPAs), the VOPAs played a vital role in the relief response. They took the initiative of organising four community kitchens utilising village level funds, to provide food support for up to 2,250 people for four days.



Organisations promoting and supporting the development of OPAs in Asia

Bangladesh	Resource Integration Centre (RIC)
Cambodia	Village Support Group (VSG), Khmer Farmers Development (KFD), Khmer Rural Development Association (KRDA), and Komnit Thmei Organization (KNTO)
China	China National Committee on Ageing (CNCA), Provincial Committee on Ageing in Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Hunan
India	HelpAge India, Gramin vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS)
Indonesia	Yayasan Emong Lansia (YEL), Telaga Amal Foundation
Lao PDR	Lao Women Union, Lao Red Cross
Myanmar	YMCA Myanmar
Nepal	Nepal Participatory Action Network (NEPAN)
Philippines	Coalition of Services of the Elderly (COSE)
Republic of Korea	HelpAge Korea
Sri Lanka	HelpAge Sri Lanka
Thailand	The Foundation for Older Persons’ Development (FOPDEV), Senior Citizens Council of Thailand (SCCT)
Vietnam	Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU), Vietnam Association for the Elderly (VAE), Reserach Center for Ageing Support (RECAS)

OPAs are multifunctional organisations



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