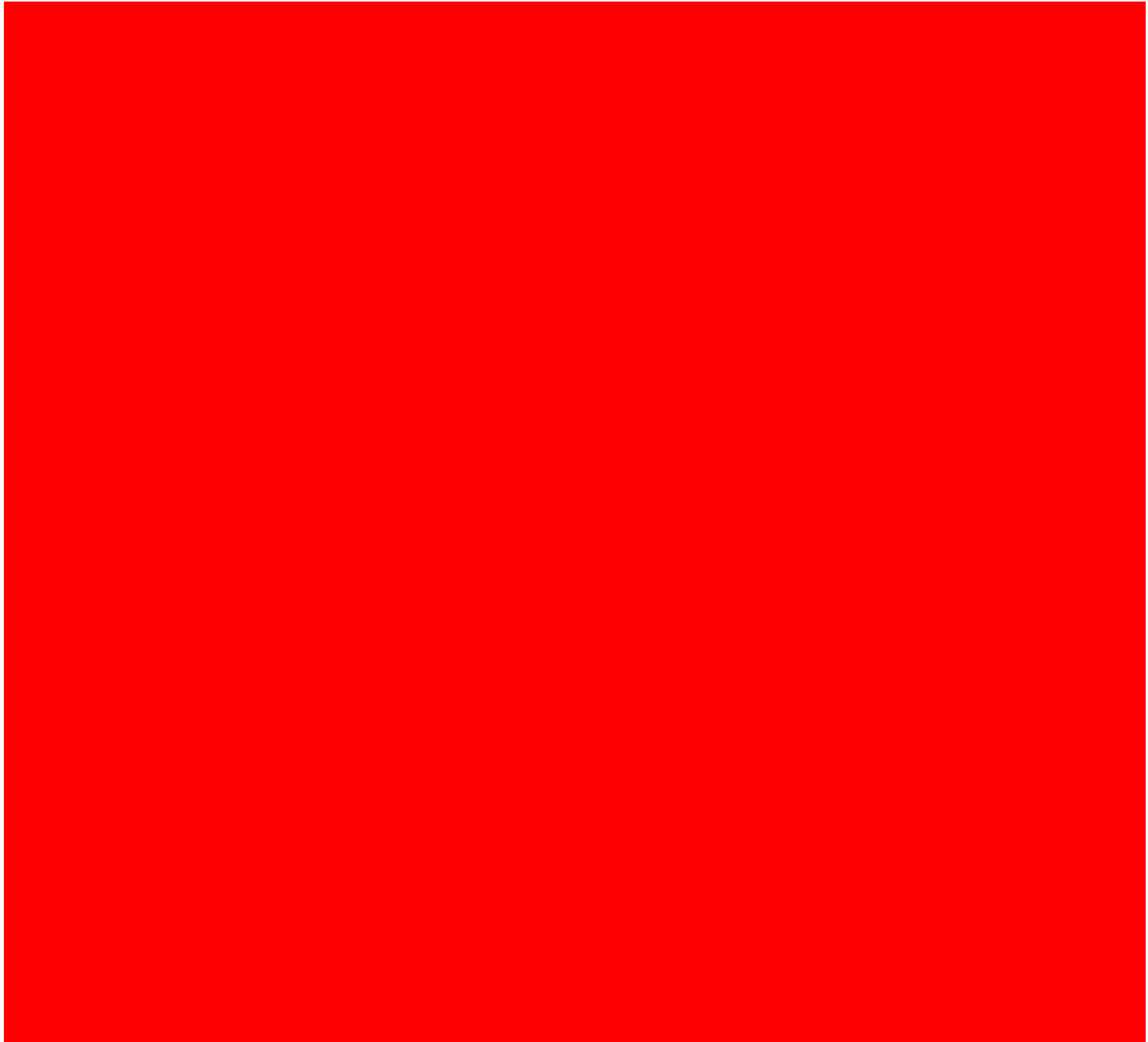


The mark of a noble society:

Human rights and older people



A briefing paper

November 2000

HelpAge
International
Leading global action on ageing

HelpAge International is a global network of not-for-profit organisations with a mission to work with and for disadvantaged older people worldwide to achieve a lasting improvement in the quality of their lives.

The mark of a noble society: Human rights and older people

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Foreword

The mark of a noble society: human rights and older people, published by HelpAge International to mark UN Human Rights Day 2000 on 10 December, challenges the widespread neglect of older people's rights. It argues that 'poverty, social exclusion and discriminatory attitudes' are setting age limits to human rights.

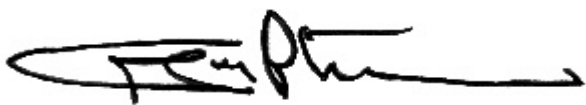
We need to assert the importance of those rights loudly and clearly in the face of a new, far-reaching global challenge – rapid demographic change. Older people are now the world's fastest-growing population group. They are also among the poorest.

Already 61 per cent of the world's population of older people, now 355 million, lives in poorer countries. This proportion will climb to 70 per cent by 2025. The developing world is becoming old before it becomes rich, with traumatic consequences for the vulnerable old and their families.

There is a compelling economic as well as moral logic for including older people in global strategies to combat poverty. This paper explores the relationship between poverty and human rights, and highlights the local, national and international barriers older people face in having their predicaments acknowledged and their contributions supported.

The paper proposes a framework for action, based on the United Nations Principles for Older Persons and on HelpAge International's 15 years of research and practical work in 70 countries. It argues that older people are a critical – and largely ignored – indicator of progress in relation to both human rights and development.

Ageing is an inevitable human process that affects us all. The extent to which we protect and promote the rights of older people reflects how we protect and promote rights in general. In the memorable words of Osei Darkwa: 'The mark of a noble society is found not in the manner in which it helps the rich, but in how it helps the poor...not in how it protects the powerful, but how it defends the vulnerable.'¹



Todd Petersen
Chief Executive
HelpAge International

The mark of a noble society is found not in how it protects the powerful, but how it defends the vulnerable.

¹ Darkwa, O. 1997. 'Reforming the Ghanaian Social Security System: Prospects and Challenges'. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 2:2

Contents

Foreword

- 3 Human rights and older people: an unfinished journey
 - The rights framework
 - Age and rights
 - On the margins
 - Age is a social construct
 - Poverty: the stumbling block
 - The worldwide agequake

- 6 Taking a closer look
 - Research: the missing dimension
 - The realities of poverty in old age
 - Social exclusion
 - Challenging negative attitudes

- 9 A framework for change
 - Valuing older people's contributions
 - The right to participate
 - Rights-based development
 - Setting standards

- 12 The mark of a noble society

Human rights and older people: an unfinished journey

The rights framework

Universally agreed human rights, developed in the wake of World War Two and collective horror and grief at the holocaust, express a value base that world of nation states has agreed should underpin social relations and organisation.

The majority of nations are now bound by the obligations enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), further built upon by codes relating to slavery, labour, women, children, torture, extra-judicial execution, discrimination and war. These rights address the social, economic, cultural and civil aspirations of all people, are intended to apply at both collective and individual levels, and have a legal basis.

Despite divisions between those who have championed civil and political rights and those pushing for economic, social and cultural rights, the overall 'package' of economic, social, civil and political rights is increasingly recognised as interdependent and indivisible.² Nonetheless, problems can arise when some rights are viewed as having greater priority than others, while not all internationally agreed rights are culturally accepted throughout the world. Adherence to rights can call into question established power relations, collective or individual, within communities, nations and wider civil society.

Article 22 of the UDHR states: 'Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.' This article clarifies the link between human rights and development, further developed by the Declaration on the Right to Development (1986).

Age and rights

So how are the rights of older people, as defined under the UDHR and held in common with all other humans, being realised, promoted and protected?

Older people are now the world's fastest growing population group: by 2050, one in five persons will be over 60 and for the first time in history people in this age group will outnumber children. The numbers of older people living in abject poverty are high and increasing.

HelpAge International is a global network of local and national organisations in over 60 countries of the developing and developed world. Our experience is that a lifetime of deprivation often leads to chronic and disabling poverty in old age. We believe that poverty, social exclusion and discriminatory attitudes towards old age, or ageism, are indeed violating the human rights of older people. Our evidence comes from 15 years of practical programme experience and participatory research carried out with older people.

Ageing is a both a universal and a personal experience. The rights and principles we espouse or deny today are our rights, now and in the future.

'We are all
rights holders
and duty
bearers.'

*Mary Robinson, UN High
Commissioner for Human
Rights, Geneva 2000*

'Older people's
rights do not
enjoy the same
UN standard-
setting as other
vulnerable
groups.'

*Stephanie Grant, Office of
the High Commissioner for
Human Rights, Geneva 2000*

² DFID (UK). *Human Rights for Poor People*. Draft paper, February 2000

- Independence
- Participation
- Care
- Self-fulfilment
- Dignity

*Main headings from the UN
Principles for Older Persons
(1991), Resolution 46/91*

On the margins

The world's poor older people are failing to benefit from the human rights provisions now in place under the UDHR. The UN Principles for Older Persons (1991)³ do not have the status of legally enforced rights, and have not led to systematic action and monitoring in social development, human rights or ethical fields to guide practice and policy regarding older people.

Ageing has been on the agenda of the United Nations since it adopted the Plan of Action on Ageing (1982) and established the Ageing Programme, but the social implications of our ageing world have yet to be incorporated into the key social development agreements of our time.

In 1999, the 54th session of the UN General Assembly recommended that the Commission for Social Development lead on the revision of the International Plan of Action on Ageing and the UN's long-term strategy on ageing. But how population ageing will affect development strategies remains unclear. Analysis of documents from key UN summits and conferences shows that older people are still one of the most neglected categories of the world's population. When they are included, it is as a special group in need of welfare support.⁴

Age is a social construct

Omitting ageing issues from social development debates affects us all. As we age we experience physical changes, and can encounter greater vulnerability to disease, disability, and sometimes loss of physical and mental capacity. We may need greater economic and social support from others.

But age is a social as well as a physical construct. In poorer populations, ageing is linked to physical limitations and economic dependency.⁵ In more affluent societies, chronological age regulates retirement laws and service provision. Social policies must allow for the diversity of ageing populations, and respond flexibly to different material and social needs, including gender-based differences.

Frailty and disability need not prevent older people from making economic and social contributions. If older people are characterised as victims, objects of pity or burdens, future generations will face a twilight existence when, in old age, the norms and values claimed for all other age groups cease to apply. Promoting older people's rights means recognising the full range of their abilities and needs. Their contributions are as real as their vulnerabilities.

Poverty: the stumbling block

Universal agreements on the importance of human rights and normative standards to regulate human relationships represent one of the great triumphs of the twentieth century, on a par with the technological and scientific advances that have enhanced the possibility of ending endemic disease and poverty. The UDHR's drafting commission, drawn largely from the developing world,⁶ dreamed of equitable worldwide social and economic development and growth.

³ Adopted as UN Resolution 91/42

⁴ HelpAge International. 2000. 'Summits ignore older people'. *Ageing and Development*. 5

⁵ Ahenkora, K. *Contributions of Older Persons to Development*. London: HelpAge International/HelpAge Ghana, 1999. *Uncertainty Rules our Lives: The Situation of Older People in Bangladesh*. London: HelpAge International/Asia RDC, 2000

⁶ India, China, the Philippines, Uruguay and Iran were key members of the drafting commission

Global poverty remains the key obstacle to achieving this vision. The target set by the international community to reduce poverty by half – with one billion people able to count on US\$1 a day by the year 2015 – looks unreachable. World Bank figures published in 1999 show that the percentage of people living in extreme poverty stands at 25 per cent in developing countries,⁷ and runs as high as 50 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Poverty has increased in some regions, including Latin America and the Caribbean.

But poverty extends beyond the issue of income. As Amartya Sen points out ‘poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities.’⁸ Poverty eradication is clearly linked to peace and security, human rights, sustainable development and environmental preservation, and measurable progress towards achieving equality, justice and diversity.⁹ Participation – the empowerment of civil society – is now accepted as an essential element in meeting poverty-reduction targets.

Poverty is also recognised as a key impediment to human rights progress.¹⁰ The World Bank, northern donor states, church-based and secular development organisations all now speak of ‘rights-based approaches to development’, which are characterised by a mix of equitable distributive processes, resource allocation, participatory decision-making and effective justice systems.¹¹ The 1999 report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights argues that governments must now make measurable progress on the Declaration on the Right to Development (1986).

The worldwide agequake

We are witnessing a demographic ‘agequake’ – a global transition from high birth and death rates to low fertility and mortality that has led to an unprecedented growth in numbers of older people worldwide. But the developing world faces the harsh reality that it is growing old before it is rich, with potentially traumatic consequences for poor older people, their families and their societies.

Already the majority of the world’s population of older people (61 per cent or 355 million) lives in poorer countries. This proportion will increase to nearly 70 per cent by 2025.¹² The proportion of older women in most populations will continue to grow, particularly among the oldest old, with numbers aged over 80 growing fastest.

The fact that the global growth of a ‘greying population’ is fastest in the developing world is only just being grasped. The myth that because life expectancy is low in the developing world older populations do not exist no longer stands up.

Yet older people’s poverty is still not a core concern in the social, economic and ethical debates of our time. Their right to development is routinely denied, with ageing seen as a minority interest or a case for special pleading. Poverty and social exclusion remain the main stumbling blocks to the realisation of the human rights of older people worldwide.¹³

7 DFID (UK). *Economic Well-being*. Consultation document, December 1999

8 Sen, A. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf, 1999

9 DFID (UK). *Human Rights for Poor People*. ECLAC/CELADE papers for technical meeting on ageing, Chile, September 1999

10 UNDP. *Human Development Report 2000*. New York: UNDP, 2000

11 DFID (UK). As above

12 *The Ageing and Development Report*. London: HelpAge International/Earthscan, 1999

13 ‘Development and the Rights of Older People’. In: *The Ageing and Development Report*. London: HelpAge International/Earthscan, 1999

Poverty is recognised as a key impediment to human rights progress.

The contributions
that older
people make
on a daily basis
to family,
community
and national
development
the world over
are not noted
or supported.

Taking a closer look

Research: the missing dimension

Older people are acknowledged to be a vulnerable group, but systematic data collection on the extent and nature of their poverty is absent. Basic population research is also needed. In some countries older people, especially women, may not even be recorded as a separate group in census figures.

Research rarely reflects older people's experience or concerns. Policy discussions usually focus on welfare support such as pensions. But universal pension coverage is not realistic in most developing countries. Institutional care is another focus, but most older people throughout the world stay at home or with a family member.

The effects of poverty on the living conditions and daily experiences of older people and their families are seldom tackled in policy and investment terms. Their poverty is not reflected in, for example, the International Development Targets (IDTs), which now set the global standards for poverty reduction. This means that a significant proportion of the world's poor is being left out of poverty programmes.

New indicators to measure the international community's progress in reaching its poverty-reduction targets urgently need to include older people.¹⁴ Current poverty assessments are overwhelmingly weighted toward issues of child nutrition, child and young-adult education, infant and maternal mortality rates and reproductive health. The contributions that older people make on a daily basis to family, community and national development the world over are not noted or supported.

Research carried out directly with older people yields a different picture. HelpAge International's participatory research in St Lucia, Ghana and South Africa has shown that most older people are net contributors to their families, not net recipients of support. In countries as diverse as Bolivia, Iraq, Armenia and Bangladesh, research by HelpAge International and the World Bank¹⁵ has shown the devastating impact of economic and social change on both older men and women. Loss of land-based assets and sources of income, and changes in family roles, have hit them hard and jeopardised the family networks they support.

This dearth of information and research on the reproductive and economic role played by older people has led development analysts and policy makers to assume older people are economically unproductive. Yet HelpAge International's evidence is that older people play a pivotal role in the household and community.

The actual and potential contributions of older people to the wellbeing and survival of their families and communities must be demonstrated if poverty is to be eradicated and their rights realised. Leaving older people out of the poverty debate is not a rational strategy for the international community or for development agencies. The demographic evidence alone shows that the international targets for poverty reduction will fail.

¹⁴ ODI/DAC. *Making Aid Work for the Poor*. Informal network on poverty reduction report. London: ODI, 1999

¹⁵ World Bank. *Older people in transition economies*. ECSSD working paper No 12. Washington: World Bank, 1999

The realities of poverty in old age

The poverty of older people translates into poor health and nutrition, high levels of risk, problems in generating income, acute difficulties in sustaining the many burdens brought by HIV/AIDS, migration, conflict and the loss of land-based assets, violence and psychological pressures. Poverty also sharpens inter-generational stresses and strains.¹⁶

Poor health linked to poverty in earlier life – due to structural inequalities, exclusion, poor diet and multiple childbirth – is exacerbated by old age. Eyesight fails as a result of years of cooking over smoky fires, or exposure to the glare off water in paddy fields. Untreated chronic conditions become disabling. Research in Tanzania and India¹⁷ shows that mortality due to malnutrition can be even higher among older people than among children. Older people say healthcare is for them the most important yet often least accessible service – with barriers caused by attitudes as much as service design.

Reduced ability to work, lack of social security, and little access to income-generation schemes bring profound financial insecurity for older people. Barely one-third of older people in the world receive any form of state subsidy, at a point in their lives when health, family support and income are declining. Such help, when given, goes a long way. Older people's pensions in South Africa and some East and Central European countries often support extended families of two or three generations.

Chances to diversify sources of income activities are scanty for older people lacking basic education. Age restrictions on credit facilities are common, despite evidence that older women in particular are very creditworthy. There are few schemes to help older people learn more or gain new skills. In all emergencies, the poor and vulnerable suffer most and longest – among them, significant numbers of older people, who make up between 10 and 30 per cent of refugees in conflict and emergency situations, now estimated at over 53 million people worldwide.

The illness and death of family members as a result of HIV/AIDS have imposed extra and unexpected care burdens on the older generation. Their own coping strategies are often severely compromised by the need to support sick children and orphaned grandchildren – at a time when they expected to rely more on the younger generation.

Most older people want to be cared for at home, and are. But high levels of depression and fear are common among poor older people – triggered by worries about how the family will cope with their illness, frailty, and death, and with burial costs.

In poor families, balancing the care of elders with children and work commitments can bring conflicting demands and expectations between generations. Violence toward older people is a serious and growing issue. In Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, rapid socio-economic change has put special pressures on families' coping skills.

Older people's vulnerability, and their potential contribution to relief delivery and rehabilitation, tend to be ignored.

Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: Guidelines for best practice.
HelpAge International, 2000

¹⁶ Heslop, A. *Ageing and Development*. HelpAge International/DFID working paper, 1999, gives a full analysis of the issues that follow

¹⁷ Ismail, S and Manandhar, M. *Better Nutrition and Older People: Assessment and Action*. London: HelpAge International, 1999

'In the past I educated my children – paying for school fees, buying books, transport, food and uniforms. I contributed by paying medical fees when the children were ill, preparing nutritious food, cleaning, providing accommodation, ploughing the fields and counselling whenever the children and their marital partners had problems. I am still doing all these things.'

Older South African, at national policy consultation held in Kemptown, 1999

Social exclusion

Exclusion of poor older people is a product of structural inequalities¹⁸ and progressive impoverishment. Lack of access to education, employment and healthcare in early life, coupled with the particular barriers faced by women in many countries, have a critical bearing on status and wellbeing in old age. Lack of power and status makes it hard for older people to claim services; find out and negotiate what is due to them; respond to abuse, violence and neglect; demand accessible information; and protest against age- and gender-related discrimination.

Such exclusion is particularly damaging when older people need health and material support services, when they face discrimination from family and state, and when socio-economic and cultural change is very rapid and profound. Lack of assets, isolation and physical weakness are all elements of the multi-dimensional disadvantages to which they are vulnerable. These are closely related to processes and institutional arrangements that exclude them from full participation in the economic, social and political life of their communities.¹⁹

Older people distanced from the mainstream of their communities face profound disadvantage and risk. In parts of northern India and some African countries, widowhood for older women brings more than loss of status – they can be ejected from their deceased husbands' homes. In a number of African countries, older people, especially women, may face witchcraft accusations, leading to banishment, self-imposed withdrawal from society, and even death.

Violence and abuse towards older men and women, although under-reported, is often linked to their declining status and the barriers they encounter in contributing to family survival.²⁰ Physical abuse includes injury but also neglect in the form of malnutrition or withholding of physical care. Psychological abuse, such as threats, verbal assault or isolation, may be used even where physical violence is absent. Attitudes among the younger public and policy-makers that exclude older people, hamper disclosure of violence and thereby contribute to their vulnerability.²¹

Public and private service delivery is typically not designed with older people's needs in mind. They face many barriers in accessing such basic services as health and sanitation facilities. Agecare has focused on localised, limited, micro-level projects for older people rather than broader strategies for inclusion at all levels.

Even where older people have rights over property or access to free healthcare, they can lack information and structures through which to pursue their claims. In Ghana, HelpAge International research²² found that many older people and service providers did not know that the government's policy of offering free healthcare was available only to the over-70s, when official life expectancy is listed at 55, and retirement is set at 60.

18 Neysmith, S. and Edwardh, J. 1984. 'Economic Dependency in the 1980s: Its Impact on Third World's Elderly'. *Ageing and Society*. 4:1

19 De Haan, A. 1998. 'Social Exclusion: An Alternative Concept for the Study of Deprivation?'. *IDS Bulletin*. 20:1

20 Unpublished project reports and research data of HelpAge International on Bolivia, Tanzania and Hungary

21 Lowick, J and Avalos, R. 'Maltrato en la Vejez, Orientaciones Generales para su Investigacion'. Study document, Centro de Capacitacion CEC, Chile, 1999

22 Ahenkora, K. *Contributions of Older Persons to Development*. London: HelpAge International/ HelpAge Ghana, 1999

Challenging negative attitudes

The social exclusion of poor older people is closely allied to negative social and personal attitudes that construe ageing as a state of diminished capacities. Age-based prejudice isolates older people from consultation and decision-making processes at family, community and national levels, and can lead to the denial of services and support on the grounds of age.

Development programmes sometimes assume that older people are being cared for by family and do not need to be included in projects, or that they have no productive role. HelpAge International research in Cambodia found that NGOs run by young people did not take older people's household and community contributions and roles into account when developing programmes.²³

The domestic and caring contributions of older women, which often enable family members to take paid work outside the house, are rarely acknowledged and are often belittled by older women and men themselves. Research in Ghana²⁴ found that when older people were asked what work they did, the response was usually: 'We are old and cannot go to farm, so we are keeping ourselves busy with minor housework.' Income that older women brought to the household through small-scale enterprises, agriculture or trading tended not to be recorded. It also found that older women were more successful than their menfolk in diversifying their livelihood strategies, and that this income was directed to the extended family, but they were not receiving targeted support for these activities.

HelpAge International believes that the contributions of older people to the economic and social fabric of their societies must now be given special attention, to combat negative attitudes, but also to determine how resources can best be allocated. Our experience is that positive change comes about when older people organise to make their voices heard. In Latin America and the Caribbean, significant advances at grassroots and policy level are already taking place as older people pioneer approaches to documentation, prevention of elder abuse, national policy formulation and the setting of care standards in hospitals and old people's homes.

A framework for change

Valuing older people's contributions

In 1994, the UN International Conference on Population and Development expressed regret that 'the elderly have come to be viewed as dependent beneficiaries of development rather than contributors to it.' The time had come to put things right. One of the outcomes of the Geneva 2000 UN Social Summit was to renew its call that older people be recognised as contributors to, as well as beneficiaries of, development.

Yet within the international development community, policies that support and enable older people remain few and far between. For example, humanitarian agencies' stated aim is to prioritise the most vulnerable, but they lack systems and structures to identify and support older people as a vulnerable group in planning and delivering relief services. They also under-estimate the role older people's skills and knowledge can play in rehabilitation and reconstruction strategies.

'Ageism is the collective failure of individuals and organisations to provide a professional service to people because of their age. It can be detected in processes, attitudes, and behaviours that amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and stereotyping.'

HelpAge International,
definition of ageism, 1999

'Only a change in social attitudes, including the attitudes and expectations of older people themselves, will reduce discrimination and exclusion of older people, and result in the allocation of resources to meet their needs.'

Uncertainty Rules Our Lives: The Situation of Older People in Bangladesh. Asia/Pacific RDC, HelpAge International, 2000

²³ *The Situation of Older People in Cambodia.* Phnom Penh: MSALVA/HelpAge International, 1998

²⁴ Ahenkora, K. As above

HelpAge International believes that some core principles should guide human rights measurements and indicators in relation to older people:

Taking an 'older person focus'

Analysis, viewpoint and programme priorities need to come from older people themselves

Support for advocacy for and by older people

Older people need to have a fair hearing, and support to ensure this

Support for older people's associations and forums

Older people need structured ways of influencing civil society and governments

Support for national organisations concerned with ageing

Older people need organisations that can network internationally to influence policy-making

Recent HelpAge International research shows a mismatch between older people's actual concerns in an emergency – the long-term threat to livelihoods and homes – and relief agencies' perception that what they need is help with short-term welfare needs. Participative methods used to collect data in emergencies in the Dominican Republic, Bosnia, Rwanda and Bangladesh found that respondents were both surprised and pleased that their views had been sought.

Our challenge is to persuade policy makers to take older people, their experiences, views and contributions seriously. All the evidence is that older people everywhere seek social inclusion as well as economic attention. The question is not what we should do about older people – but what would we do without them? Socially and economically, can their contributions be ignored any longer?

The right to participate

For HelpAge International, participation is a set of methods and a philosophy to promote the principle of older people's inclusion in, and ownership of, the processes of development. The full participation of older men and women in the social, cultural, political and economic life of their communities is not only a development imperative – it is also a matter of basic human rights.

In Bolivia, a governmental decision to grant pensions to the over-60s met with an outcry from older people because most were not registered at birth and therefore could not prove their eligibility for the payment. Older people took to the street and lobbied the government, the legal profession and the public to secure the help they needed to get essential identification. Some 5,000 persons received their entitlements.

Legal aid centres set up by the NGO Defensa del Anciano (Defence of the Older Person) have gone on to deal with cases of robbery and abuse of older people as well as identity, and work with older women, nine out of ten of whom cannot read or write.

Rights-based development

In 1999, Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke of a rights-based approach to tackling poverty: 'The complementarity of civil and political rights to economic, social and cultural rights must be fully recognised.' In 2000, she re-affirmed: 'The reality of poverty is that the poor are denied almost all their human rights.'²⁵ It has further been argued that 'addressing all rights, in terms of their economic, political and social context, and holding all actors accountable, constitute critical steps towards challenging the conditions that create and tolerate poverty.'²⁶

Older people should be explicitly included as a category in human rights treaties and conventions, and abuses of those standards should be monitored and reported on in the same way as abuses perpetrated against other vulnerable groups. Omissions need to be noted and amendments sought.

For HelpAge International, rights-based development means promoting equality and non-discrimination, removing gender- and age-based obstacles and barriers,

²⁵ Address to the UNFPA/GINAS/AIESEC/HAI panel in Geneva, June 2000

²⁶ Russell, G. *Development and Rights*. Oxford: Oxfam, 1998

broadening opportunities, increasing influence over decision-making and amplifying choices and freedoms which make the environment more secure and sustainable.²⁷ A rights framework allows us to explore and challenge international and national failures to support older people, to seek definitions of poverty and wellbeing from older people, and to make our own and others' programmes more responsive to the needs and capacities of older people.

Setting standards

HelpAge International's mandate commits us to realise older people's rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to further the United Nations Principles for Older Persons. These instruments provide a useful and comprehensive framework in which to monitor standards of human rights compliance for older people. They help us develop our own programmes and measure their results. Promoting awareness of and adherence to the Principles is integral to practical work with older people and to the lobbying we engage in.

The division of the Principles into five key areas corresponds well to the core concerns of older people. These themes form a basis from which to devise programmes that are inclusive, value-based and present good models of development.

The principle of **independence** recognises older people's wish to be independent for as long as possible, and is closely linked to ensuring their access to the basic material rights of food, shelter, water, income, education, transport and physical security.

The principle of **care** asserts older people's right to support, to having a say about the kind of care they want and require, and to consideration in how they are cared for. For the vast majority of older people, family support still provides the main source of care in old age and long-term institutional care is available only to a very small proportion of older people.

The principle of **self-fulfilment** recognises that older people have a continuing right to pursue opportunities for the development of their potential, through education, skills training, employment opportunities and the chance to take part in community affairs.

The principle of **dignity** asserts that older people should not be belittled or treated with less respect. Abusive practices and behaviour erode dignity. Harsh living conditions and lack of access to material and social resources are an assault on the dignity of older persons, as is their exclusion on the grounds of age, vulnerability and disability.

The principle of **participation** underpins the wider realisation of their rights. The needs and capabilities of older people should be considered in the planning and implementation of all local, national and international research, policy and programme initiatives that affect them. Their right to be consulted about decisions that will affect them directly should be recognised.

A rights framework allows us to explore and challenge failures to support older people.

²⁷ McCormack, M. *Rights based development in the Caribbean*. Paper to the UNDP symposium in Guyana, January 2000

'Applying methodological approaches to make [human rights compliance] assessment more effective, including the development of indicators and benchmarks relevant for economic, social and cultural rights, is recommended.'

The Human Rights Commission, Geneva, 1999 report

The mark of a noble society

The experience of HelpAge International worldwide is that older people are routinely denied both protection and recognition of their rights. The 'mark of a noble society' – its commitment to upholding the rights of the poor and vulnerable sectors in society – is in this respect still elusive.

The UN Principles for Older Persons must form a global framework for change for governments and for international and multilateral agencies committed to furthering the rights of all persons. This is not to deny the rights of other vulnerable groups, but to seek inclusion of a critical part of the world's population. The inclusion of older people must be seen as a litmus test of commitment to the rights of all other groups.

A consideration of the world's growing numbers of older people should form part of all reviews of poverty and development targets, and the realities and aspirations of older people should be placed centre stage in all forums which deal with the complex social development issues of our time.

We urgently need a shift in the focus of development and social programmes, so that they give explicit economic and social value to older people's contributions to their families and communities, and promote their human rights, responding to their material needs as an integral part of that package.

Laying aside ethics and humanity, demographics now mean we need to build a world in which 'generations need to invest in one another and recognise diversity and generational inter-dependence, guided by the twin principles of reciprocity and equity.'²⁸

We need more – and better – older-people-focused research and action. Policy-making for older people should actively involve them in identifying both problems and solutions. Attitudes that marginalise and exclude older people should be recognised and rectified, and age-based discrimination needs to be combated.

Finally, we must push for national and international agreements and strategies that bind governments, international and multinational agencies to promote and realise the full range of human rights for older people, according to the international human rights framework and the United Nations Principles for Older Persons.

HelpAge International resources

Briefing papers

The mark of a noble society: human rights and older people is one of a series of briefing papers on core issues relating to ageing produced by HelpAge International. Other titles include:

Capacity building and ageing: a position paper

Emergencies and ageing: a position paper

Gender and ageing: a position paper

Participation and ageing: a position paper

Poverty and ageing: a position paper

Free.

Other publications

The Ageing and Development Report: Poverty, Independence and the World's Older People

(Editors: Judith Randel and Tony German, 1999)

A HelpAge International report on the circumstances of older people in developing countries and countries in transition, with chapters on economic security, health, family and community life, poverty, gender and emergencies; and information on demographic trends and ageing in specific countries and regions.

Price: £14.95. Available from Earthscan Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 0433. Email: earthinfo@earthscan.co.uk.

Website: www.earthscan.co.uk

The Ageing and Development Report: a summary (1999)

A summary of the full report is available in English, French and Spanish.

Free. Available at www.helpage.org in English, French and Spanish.

Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: Guidelines for best practice (2000)

Based on wide-ranging new research from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas and on 20 years' global disaster experience, these guidelines aim to help relief agencies meet the special needs of older people in emergencies. Available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

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Ageing and Development

A regular briefing which aims to raise awareness of the contribution, needs and rights of older people and to promote the development of laws and policies that will bring a lasting improvement to the quality of life of disadvantaged older people. Free to policy makers, programme planners and researchers concerned with development and poverty eradication.

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