

Promoting the rights of older people in the community in Mae Hong Son province

Experience from the evidence-based responsiveness to emerging challenges of population ageing in Thailand project



Promoting the rights of older people

At the international level, there are mechanisms for vulnerable groups such as children, women and people with disabilities, however there is no United Nations Convention on the rights of older people. In 1999, the International Year of Older Persons, the UN Principles for Older Persons was issued followed by an adoption of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing in 2002 (MIPAA) by the UN member countries including Thailand. But these UN Principles and Plans are not legally binding so there is no legal obligation for the member countries to abide by.

In ASEAN countries, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has a key role in promoting and protecting human rights at a regional level. There are also specific committees for promoting and protecting the rights of some vulnerable groups i.e. children, women and migrants, but not for older people either.

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand Section 54 stipulates the rights of older people to receive assistance from the state and the 2003 Older Persons Act clearly states their rights and entitlements. There is also the National Declaration on Older Persons and the National Long-term Plan for Older Persons to guide the development of programmes and services for older people. There is a national law to promote wellbeing of older people and their rights, which is more advanced than the international mechanisms and some ASEAN countries. There are the National Commission on Human Rights which include plans on older people, and the National Commission on Ageing supported by the line ministries, particularly the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, to guide and monitor the implementation of the policies and plans.



HelpAge
International

age helps

The results of the National Survey of Older Persons in 2007 by the Office for National Statistics found that 64% of older people did not know of a single benefit or knew only one about the benefits they were asked, and about 16% knew only two of the benefits. Limited awareness and knowledge about the rights and entitlements according to the laws and regulations has become a major constraint in accessing various services.

Why promote the rights of older people in Thailand?

The country has a law, national plan on ageing and national bodies aiming to promote wellbeing of older people, including promoting their rights. Still, it appears that gaining information on and accessing the rights and entitlements under the law is quite limited in scope. A study on access to rights and entitlements of older people according to the 2003 Older Persons' Act (*Sasipat Yodphet, 2008*) found that 72% of older people are aware of the rights and entitlements at the middling level. However, 63% of older people do not use their rights and entitlements due to lack of information and unavailability of services in their respective locations. Around 25% are aware of the services but do not use them and only 13% actually use the services.

Promoting the rights of older people in the community in Mae Hong Son province

A study was conducted to analyse the situation of older people in the project areas prior to the project implementation to provide basic information about the situation of older people. Data on specific issues including older people's rights were collected in every target village to provide greater clarity, while consultation with communities and concerned organisations at the provincial and local levels also took place. Concerned government organisations included the Provincial Social Development and Human Security Office (PSDHSO), the Provincial Public Health Office (PPHO), the Tambon Administrative Organisations (TAOs), and the Sub-district Health Promoting Hospital (SHPH). At the community level, a range of community leaders and groups were included in the consultation such as a village head and village committee, members of a local administrative organisation council, different CBOs – Elderly Club, Village Health Volunteer group (VHV), etc. The process led to the recommendations and conclusion of setting up a volunteer group called the **Older People Watch Group (OPWG)**.

Who are the OPWG volunteers?

The OPWG volunteers are a group of people who wish to promote and protect older people's rights and entitlements in their respective villages. They were selected by key stakeholders in their villages, and were required to attend training sessions so that they were equipped with sufficient and necessary knowledge and understanding. After the trainings, they took on roles as community volunteers in disseminating useful information on the rights and entitlements of older people and assisting older people to access services.

Identifying and selecting the OPWG volunteers

- The project and communities worked together in identifying and selecting the OPWG volunteers by sharing a concept of setting up the OPWG, based on the result of consultations on process and criteria with community leaders including an older people's group.
- Criteria for the selection of the volunteers were quite simple as the work was in the community and people were familiar with each other. To be qualified, a person had to reside in the community, be willing to attend the training sessions required, accept the assigned duties and implement the agreed activities to promote the rights of older people without monetary incentives. There were no age, sex, and period of volunteering limits.

- The interested people had to express their interest and apply with the community project working group. There were about 5-10 volunteers in each village depending on the number of older people as well as interested people. The number of volunteers in each village was flexible and more people could be accepted.

From the project's experience, many of the OPWG volunteers were the existing community leaders such as a chairperson or committee, members of older people's group, head or deputy head of a village, member of council of TAOs, chairperson of Community Saving Group, VHV, Community Volunteer for the Elderly Care (CVEC), etc. A majority of the volunteers were younger people.

Process for building capacity of the OPWG volunteers

The interested people had to attend the training sessions provided by the project, which aimed to:

- discuss and agree on expected roles and responsibilities of the volunteers and how they were related to the project
- enhance knowledge and understanding of the volunteers about the situation of older people, particularly in the Mae Hong Son province, using the information generated from the data collection prior to and at the beginning of the project
- educate the volunteers on the rights of older people and related laws, particularly the 2003 Older Persons' Act, article 11 which states rights and entitlements of older people
- discuss and agree on approaches for the volunteers in promoting and protecting the rights of older people in their respective communities. They had to coordinate with the project team and relevant organisations and groups such as the PSDHSO, Association of Elder's Clubs, Mae Hong Son province, TAOs, SHPH and different groups of volunteers in communities such as VHV, CVEC and Community Development Volunteer

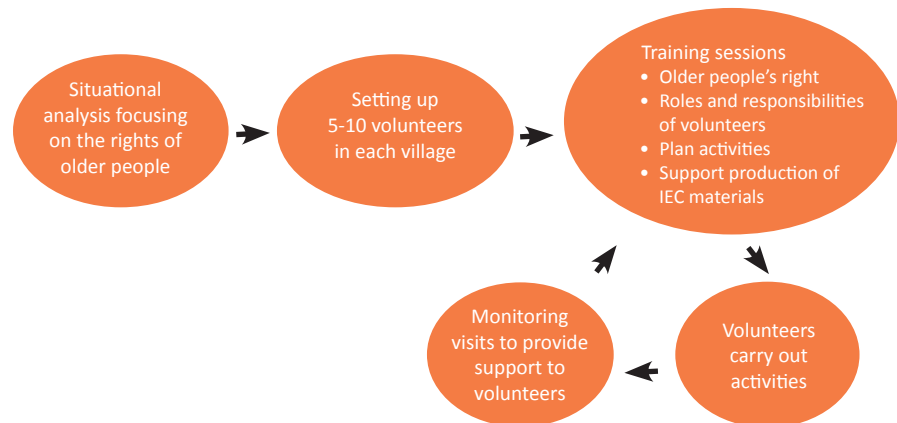
Resource persons to train the volunteers were drawn from the project, PSDHSO, the Association, TAOs, PPHO and SHPH. Participatory training techniques were used to facilitate adult learning and sharing knowledge and experience of the participants.

In addition to an initial training, refresher sessions are provided to the volunteers at least once a year. The topics for these refresher sessions depend on the situation and needs of the volunteers. They could also include new issues that are considered necessary or useful to the volunteers in order for them to carry out their duties, such as change of the benefit of the social pension scheme or change of procedures in applying for different benefits. The volunteers receive monitoring visits provided by the project team, which take place at the community level. The visits provide opportunities for the volunteers and the project team to discuss and find ways to resolve occurring problems and plan new or adjust activities as necessary. The volunteers are also facilitated to participate in relevant meetings and forums beyond the project.

Older people were trained on campaign t-shirts screen printing. The words on the t-shirts are "Proud to be old" and "Older People Watch Group"



Process for building capacity and setting up the OPWG volunteers



The strategic approach for promoting the rights of older people in communities

- Establishment of the OPWG to promote the rights of older people in the community
- Production of local media using participatory approach and working with local media groups/operators to support the promotion of older people's rights
- Working closely with older people's groups and their network's community leaders
- Close coordination with the respective TAOs and SHPHs
- Linking with programmes and plans of the Association of Elder's Clubs and PSDHSO

What are the activities carried out by the OPWG volunteers?

- **Disseminating information on the rights of older people** to older people themselves, their families, community through community meetings on different occasions as appropriate, a village loud speaker system, community radio, individual home visits, using banners and wearing campaign t-shirts, informal meeting and discussing
- **Assisting and facilitating access to services for older people** and their families. For example, coordinate with the concerned government agencies such as PSDHSO or TAOs. The volunteers can also seek support from other sectors to support older people, for example from the business or non-government sectors or individuals
- **Provide information on activities provided by the government agencies** and others that are useful for older people. For example, outreach programmes by government agencies for health services and social pension payment
- **Provide counseling regarding rights and entitlements** such as the National Health Security programme, disability allowance, financial assistance for funeral services and for emergency situations
- **Assisting concerned government agencies** in identifying older people who are eligible for the existing government's services
- **Participate in planning the implementation of the project**, especially the activities relating to the rights of older people so that they effectively respond to older people's needs and concerns. The volunteers also actively support the development of older people's groups and other community activities in their respective villages

Development of local media to support the OPWG volunteers in carrying out their duties

Results of the situational analysis showed that lack of appropriate and sufficient communication materials specifically designed for older people were one of the key barriers for awareness, knowledge and access to their rights and entitlements and other useful information. This is particularly among older people in ethnic minority communities in remote rural areas. The project therefore included the development of different types of local communications materials to support the volunteers and other concerned agencies including local government agencies and different community-based groups.



Older people participated in training and joined the community radio team in broadcasting as part of the practical sessions, facilitated by the resource person from the Foundation for Older Persons' Development (FOPDEV), one of the project's partners

Process for the development of local communications materials and dissemination

- **Working together** – the project focused on using a participatory approach at all stages including discussion, planning and the actual production of the communications materials. Participation of the communities ensured that the communications materials were appropriate and could effectively be used in the target communities. Consultation with the OPWG volunteers and other users such as older people's groups, community leaders and PSDHSO was used to determine types of materials, channels for dissemination, time frame, and quantity.
- **Selection of participants** – While the project's priorities were the OPWG volunteers, other interested people such as the relevant project staff and community leaders were given the opportunity to attend as well. In addition to knowledge and skills in producing communications materials, the training process raised awareness of the participants about the ageing issue and the materials produced were used for promoting the rights of older people.
- **Producing different types of communications materials** – Each type of communications materials have different strengths and weaknesses. Some materials were appropriate for some specific groups or circumstances and in Mae Hong Son province, there are many local dialects. The main target group was older people, including those who spoke local dialects.
- **Contents** – Although the communications materials focus on the rights and entitlements of older people according to the Older Persons Act 2003, other useful information for older people was also included.
- **Collaborating with local media producers** – At the beginning of the project, resource people for the training were drawn from the project's partners. Later on, recognising the benefits of collaboration with local media producers, they were also invited to serve as a resource in trainings to share experiences and facilitate practical sessions. In the process, they were sensitised and had better understanding of the ageing issue. They also supported dissemination of information by using the materials produced.
- **Mediums for disseminating** – This depended on types of communications materials such as CD, community radio which operated the project's local partner, village loud speaker systems which exist in nearly all villages, printed materials for distribution on different occasions, vinyl boards displayed at government's service points such as SHPH, the Association of Elder's Clubs, Mae Hong Son, campaign T-shirt were worn by the participants after the training to disseminate the information.

“The promotion of rights in the community resulted in increased recognition of the rights of older people and access to services.”

Member of older people’s group, La-ooop village

Different types of communications materials, contents and language used

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Type | Community radio, national radio, CD, video, vinyl board, campaign T-shirt, printed materials such as brochures, booklets and different types of forms for accessing government’s services |
| Content | Rights and entitlements of older people according to the Older Persons’ Act 2003. Other useful information such as development for older people’s group, health promotion, local cultural and traditional beliefs and practices or government’s announcements. |
| Language | Central Thai, northern Thai, Hmong, Lua, Lahu, Pa-O, Thai Yai, Karen |

How did the older people and communities benefit from promoting the rights of older people?

- The overall awareness and understanding of the rights of older people have increased amongst older people, families, communities, individuals and concerned organisations. They are aware of changes of the benefits resulting from changes in government policy, such as the increased amount of the social pension (old age monthly allowance) from the flat rate of 500 baht to payment according to age or adjustment of the criteria for using the Express Lane at a hospital.
- Although the project targeted older people, the process of involving other key stakeholders and using a variety of media has resulted in a wider impact.
- There has been greater access to government services by older people and their families. In the early stages of the project implementation, some benefits were used by few people even though they were eligible. There has been a significant increase in the number of people using the services. Not only the older people and the family benefit, but other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups were supported by the OPWG volunteers as well.
- A mechanism to promote the rights of older people in the community i.e. OPWG volunteers was established and is still in place. It is integrated with the structure of the older people’s groups, which can continue after the project ends. The Association of older people’s groups agreed to support this.
- The ageing issue as a whole has gained more attention. Some local authorities directly supported the rights issue thorough the allocation of funding to support activities which aim to promote the rights of older people.

Lessons learned

- **Both young and old working together** – Although the promotion of the rights focuses on older people, there is no restrictions on age. Eighty percent of the OPWG volunteers are non-older people, which compliment older volunteers in terms of agility and physical strength. When other vulnerable groups need help, they will not be neglected, ensuring that the improving older people’s situation is a matter of people of all ages and is beneficial to the community as a whole.

“In addition to older people, other disadvantaged groups also get help, such as people with disabilities; both young and old were informed about their entitlements and were assisted to register to access to the financial assistance.”

Community leader, Thung Sarapee village



OPWG volunteers and interested people in the communities regularly received training in promoting the rights of older people and follow-up support from the project's staff

- **The OPWG volunteers from the community leaders** – Seventy percent of the volunteers have other roles as leaders in the communities. Their existing roles allow them to use their capacity, information and support from relevant agencies to better serve older people. For example, the VHV can effectively facilitate access to health services. However, in some cases, multiple roles can lead to over workload due to time limitation. It is therefore essential to balance their roles and responsibilities, including recruiting new volunteers.
- **Support the OPWG volunteers by producing communications materials for rights promotion in local dialects** – The production process emphasises participation of the target groups and communities. Diversity of communications materials produced effectively addresses the limitation in terms of types. They are suitable for different groups, localities and easy to understand. There are also more channels for dissemination.
- **Sufficient additional training and follow-up** have a positive affect on the performance of the OPWG volunteers. The additional training is equally important as the initial training. Frequency, time frame, topics and other issues depend on circumstances of each locality such as concerns of older people and volunteers. Having a volunteer coordinator selecting from the volunteer groups greatly facilitates provision of support to the volunteers, particularly for remote areas.
- **Many of the benefits under the law are not consistent with the needs of local older people** – Although it is useful to provide overall information on the rights and entitlements according to the law, it is suggested that the information provided should emphasise the points that are relevant to the localities and target groups.
- **No identity card, no rights** – In the highland areas, the majority of people are from ethnic minority tribes and many older people do not have an ID card. This ID card is essential to prove their nationalities and make them eligible for the government's services. Knowing that they have no ID and are not eligible, these older people are not interested in seeking information and participating in the project's activities. On the other hand, availability of information makes concerned service providers pay more attention in addressing the issue of lack of ID cards among older people, which will be explicitly included as part of promotion of older people's rights.
- **Awareness, knowledge and budget constraints of local authorities** are some of the important conditions for promoting the rights and entitlements of older people in the community. It is therefore vital to sensitise and build capacity to better serve older people among local authorities while also strengthening older people's groups and their networks and promoting their participation in the community development planning and implementing process.
- **Merge OPWG volunteers with older people's groups** – In cases where there is already a reasonably strong older people's group in the community, it should be a key mechanism in setting up the OPWG, by integrating with its existing activities/structure. If there is no existing OPG or it is not sufficiently strong, it should be strengthened along the process of establishing the OPWG. The OPWG can be merged with the OPG later as appropriate. Being integrated with the existing OPG will provide an opportunity for the OPWG to receive support from concerned agencies. It will also promote intergenerational approach – young and old work together.



Involving youths in the project's activities is one way for raising awareness and improving knowledge about the rights of older people since they can pass on the information within their families and communities

Sustainability and expansion in future

Participation of the community and coordination with local agencies, such as TAOs and SHPHs is crucial to sustainability. The project emphasises working with different local actors and they have expressed their willingness to continue to support the promotion of older people's rights after the project ends.

- Association of Elder's Clubs/Senior Citizen Council of Mae Hong Son will support the promotion of the rights of older people and continue to strengthen and develop volunteering for the development of older people's groups in every district of Mae Hong Son province.
- PSDHSO Mae Hong Son has a plan to expand the CVEC. Priority for selection of the volunteers will be given to the existing OPWG volunteers. Promotion of older people's rights will be integrated with the existing CVEC's work. In addition, older people's rights will be included in trainings for new CVECs as appropriate.
- Local authorities in some areas include the promotion of the rights of older people in their annual plans and budget. This will help facilitate the performance of the OPWG volunteers and older people's groups in their respective locations.
- SHPHs are in place to facilitate access to health care services for older people according to the Older Persons' Act 2003 and other relevant laws.

Recommendations

- Related agencies such as Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) and the National Human Right Commission should support expansion of the promotion of older people's rights approach using volunteers in association with the Association and other interested organisations, including civil society organisations, human rights agencies and older people's groups and networks.
- Sensitise local authorities so that they will pay more attention to the issues of older people and their rights and further support initiatives for older people.
- Concerned agencies should put more effort in assisting older people of ethnic minority groups in obtaining an identity card, which will allow them to have access to their rights and entitlements.
- Integrate topics on the rights of older people in trainings for different community volunteers such as VHV, CVEC and community leaders.
- Promote production of various types of communication materials on the rights and entitlements of older people in local dialects with participation of the communities to support expansion of the approach developed by the project.
- Encourage the community radio networks to actively educate older people and other groups in the community on their rights.

About the project

Promoting the rights of older people is one of the key components of the project "Evidence-based Responsiveness to the Emerging Ageing Society in Thailand, Mae Hong Son province (2009-2012)".

The main purpose is to promote access to social, health and economic rights and entitlements of older people through policy advocacy at the national level and implementation of various activities at the local level. The project is part of the larger project "United Nations Joint Programme on Integrated Highland Livelihood Development in Mae Hong Son (UNJP-LH-MHS)".

It is coordinated by HelpAge International and implemented in collaboration with other organisations, both government organisations and NGOs i.e. The Association of Elder's Clubs of Mae Hong Son, and Senior Citizen Council of Thailand, Chiang Mai, Provincial Social Development and Human Security Office and Foundation for Older Persons' Development. It covers 9 villages in five sub-districts of Muang, Mae Lanoi and Pangmapha districts, and is funded by UNFPA and UN Trust Fund.

HelpAge International - East Asia/Pacific Regional Office

6 Soi 17, Nimmanhaemin Road, Suthep, Muang, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand
Tel: +66 53 225440, Fax: +66 53 225441, hai@helpageasia.org, www.helpage.org