

# Older people's associations in Asia:

*Strengths and key factors for sustainability and replication*



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Older people's associations (OPAs) offer an approach for inclusive, sustainable community development that actively engages the growing population of older people. In order to assess how effectively OPAs are meeting the needs of older people, HelpAge commissioned action-based research that included an assessment of the OPA model in four countries in Asia: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the research was to identify factors that promote and sustain OPAs in the four countries. This briefing outlines the findings of the final report, highlighting the strengths of OPAs in the study countries and the key factors for their sustainability and replication.

## Introduction

Globally, declines in fertility combined with longer life expectancies are leading to unprecedented demographic changes. By 2050, more than one in five people in the world (21 per cent) will be over the age of 60 and the number of persons living over the age of 80 is projected to triple, from 143 million in 2019 to 426 million in 2050. The Asia-Pacific region currently has the world's largest number of people over age 60, at just under 500 million. By 2050, an estimated 1.2 billion people over the age of 60 will live in the region and half the overall population will be over the age of 50.

Population ageing has significant social and economic implications. Concerted action is needed if we are to ensure older people are able to enjoy a future free from poverty, inequality and discrimination, and lead dignified, healthy and secure later lives.

OPAs have been shown to successfully promote older people's wellbeing and rights, and ensure that their considerable knowledge, skills and resources are fully recognised.

## Older people's associations

There are a variety of models of OPAs throughout the world, including in Asia. Some OPA models offer a limited number of activities, such as community-based OPAs that organise social activities for retirees, or national networks of older people that represent their interests to policy makers. There are also multifunctional OPAs that address a number of domains, including healthcare, homecare, livelihoods, social activities, and rights and entitlements (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1: The multi-functional roles of OPAs*



There is a unique form of multifunctional OPA developed in Vietnam called Intergenerational Self-Help Clubs (ISHCs). ISHCs have proven effective at bringing older people and people from younger generations together to improve their own lives and contribute to their communities. ISHCs in Vietnam have also rapidly replicated throughout the country in the recent past.

In recognition of the benefits of the ISHC model, HelpAge International's Asia Pacific Regional Office has begun to promote multifunctional OPAs throughout the region. This has been supported through a range of initiatives, including the Strengthening Ageing Networks in Asia (SANA) project.

HelpAge's development process for multifunctional OPAs is outlined in Figure 2. This is based upon the experience of development of the ISHC model in Vietnam. Within this two-year process, OPAs typically are not considered 'mature' until they are about 18 months old.

This briefing is based on findings from research focused on OPAs in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam. These are countries with distinct policy contexts and social, economic and cultural conditions. The OPAs within these countries also vary. They represent different models of associations engaged in different sets of activities. An overview of the types of OPAs found in each country is given in Table 1.

Figure 2: Five stages of OPA development

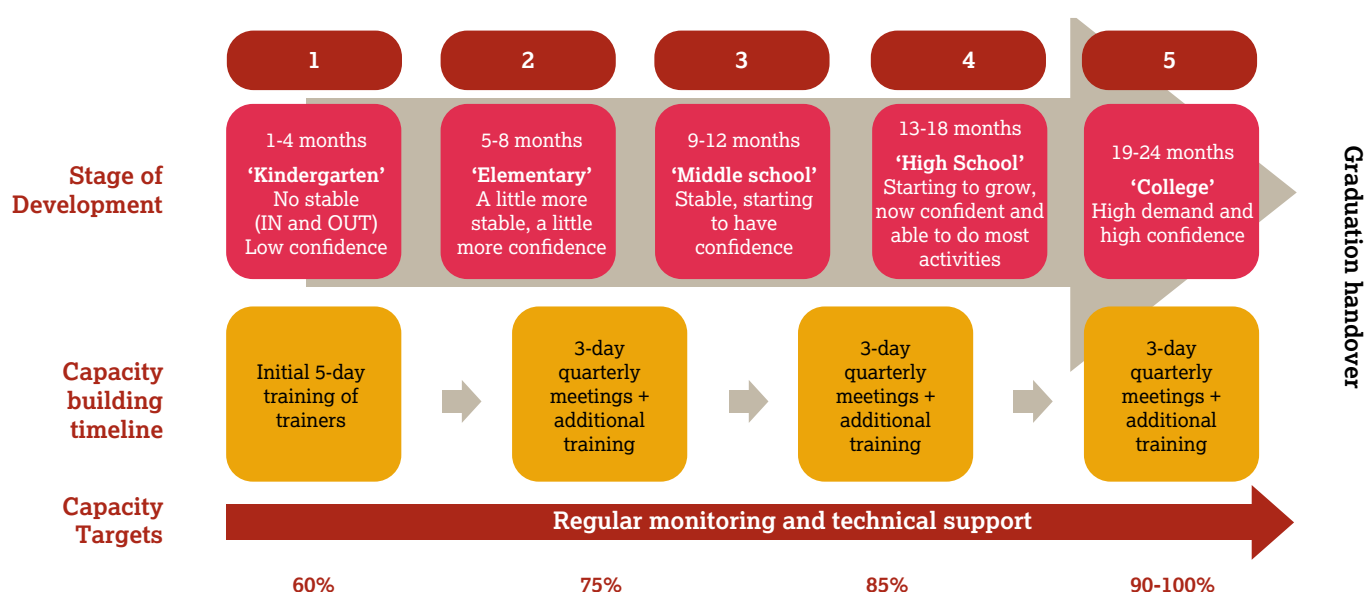


Table 1: OPAs in the study countries

	Name	Est Since	# of OPAs	# MF	# IG	Average # of members (per club)
Bangladesh	OPA/OCM	2003	298	11	6	20-35
Cambodia (HAC)	OPA	1998	156	156	156	40-150
Cambodia (MOSAVY)	OPA	2016	1,636	1,636	-	40-150
Indonesia	IG	2015	6	6	6	30-40
Vietnam (VAE and NGO)	ISHC	2006	1,641	1,641	1,641	50-70
Vietnam (VAE and OPA)	OPA	1990	100,000	-	-	60-200

Notes: MF = Multifunctional, IG = Intergenerational Group, OCM = Older Citizen Monitoring Group, HAC = HelpAge Cambodia, MOSAVY = Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, VAE = Vietnam Association of the Elderly, NGO = Non-Government Organisations, ISHC = Intergenerational Self-Help Club



The majority of the OPAs considered for this study have been formed within the last two years and were younger than 18 months when the research was carried out. This makes comparisons over time challenging and means the OPAs included may not have yet reached their potential strength – this is particularly likely to be the case in areas such as capacity building and fundraising. Despite this, recent mid-term evaluation of the SANA project found that all the OPAs involved were already either strong or very strong.

The findings below reflect broad themes that emerged in and across contexts and are consistent with previous research. For more information, including country-level findings and recommendations for OPA development, please refer to HelpAge’s report entitled “*Action Research to Assess the OPA Model in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam (SANA Phase II)*”.<sup>2</sup>

## Strengths of OPAs

### 1. Offering a wide range of activities with diverse benefits

OPAs offer a wide range of activities that attract older people and provide multiple benefits. Older people value their membership, want to participate in club activities and believe that their engagement is personally beneficial. Non-members are interested in joining the clubs, attracted by the breadth of activities. One of the more consistent reasons given for interest in ISHCs in Vietnam is the comprehensiveness of club activities which ensure ISHCs address a need that no other organisation currently meets for older people. Club leaders and members are committed to the success of their clubs and believe that they make a critical difference to the happiness, health and wellbeing of their members.

#### Box 1: Income generating activities

In Nglumut subvillage in Indonesia, OPAs have used a lump sum grant to establish a waste bank. This has proven to be a useful way of generating revenue for not only the OPA and its members but also wider community members of the waste bank. The amount of annual income earned from the waste bank for each member is significant, and close to an average week’s wages in the community. Following the success of the initiative, members are intent on developing “upcycling” activities – rather than simply collecting and selling recyclable waste, they will also use some of the waste to make products that can be sold.

<sup>2</sup> The report is available at <https://www.helpage.org/download/5ed6352440279>



*“I feel more confident because we are able to support one another, especially those with sickness.”*

#### **Box 2: Homecare**

In Vietnam, each ISHC has a number of homecare volunteers who are trained to provide support to prioritised older people at least twice per week. The ISHCs take an active role in supporting frail older people, including befriending, helping with housework, provision of personal care, labour assistance and supporting care receivers to integrate in society. As well as supporting more vulnerable older people, the activities benefit volunteers who are trained to provide care. As one older person explained, “I feel more confident because we are able to support one another, especially those with sickness”.

#### **Box 3: Psycho-social support**

In Cambodia, the civil war ended less than 40 years ago and many of the current OPA members were affected by violence or the trauma of conflict. Activities like singing and dancing are helping to facilitate the re-building of community ties that are still weak after the conflict, whilst also providing a mechanism through which older people can remember and re-connect to happier times before the war. According to HelpAge Cambodia staff, many older people have been very isolated and had forgotten what it felt like to dance or have fun. The HelpAge OPAs create a welcoming space in which older people can re-connect with their neighbours without fear.

#### **Box 4: Health activities**

In Indonesia, OPA members regularly participate in health screenings and group exercise. At some clubs, health checks take place prior to a monthly meeting, with members helping to conduct blood pressure and weight screenings. OPA leaders report that there is normally a higher attendance when they announce healthcare screenings as part of upcoming events.

As a result of the popularity of these events, local healthcare providers have started to use OPA activities as a means for promoting disease prevention, including through offering training on healthy eating and other topics, and through administering health checks. OPAs are in this way complementing local community participation strategies for reducing the prevalence of non-communicable diseases and helping health centres to engage an important target group.

## **2. Providing social enjoyment**

Social enjoyment is the most commonly identified benefit of OPAs and a primary reason that people stay active in clubs. While the practical benefit of income generating activity may be additional income, older people also report more subtle benefits such as having something to do. Health checks similarly have obvious, practical benefits such as identifying hypertension, but they also represent an area of interest and learning that go beyond improving members’ own health.

## **3. Promoting older people’s participation in communities and development**

Members and stakeholders agree OPAs nurture a strong sense of community among members while presenting effective and welcome forums through which older people can and do support others and give back to the community. In Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia, participants report that OPA activities help them to see ways in which they could and want to participate in their communities, including through volunteering, facilitating self-help and mutual

support, and promoting shared learning. OPAs also offer a forum through which members with professional backgrounds and other skills can share their knowledge and experience for the benefit of the community and receive acknowledgement for doing so. In this way, they facilitate the recognition that older people represent an important pool for local leadership.

People also appreciate the role OPAs play in bringing together diverse groups within communities, including different age groups and those of different economic status.

#### **4. Supporting the inclusion of older people with disabilities**

OPAs have the potential to be an important mechanism for the inclusion of older people with disabilities. OPAs act as a kind of “social safety net” providing services and benefits to those most in need and filling gaps in some instances in government services.<sup>3</sup> Home visits by OPA volunteers, as described in Box 2, support social engagement of those who are bed-bound or have severe mobility impairments and OPAs can also assist older people to access to health and care services.

#### **5. Promoting the participation and leadership of older women**

In all four countries, women make up a substantial number of members of OPAs and within the HelpAge-supported clubs in three of the four countries they make up the majority of both club members and members of club management boards (CMBs). Engagement in OPAs provides older women with access to health services, financial resources, and community support that they may not otherwise receive, and can make a difference to their mental and physical wellbeing. Women members say participating in club activities makes them feel more connected to their communities. OPAs can also enable older women to develop leadership skills (see Box 5).

##### **Box 5: Developing women’s participation and leadership**

In Bangladesh, the village level OPAs have the potential to offer opportunities for women to engage in new ways in their communities, gain new status and develop leadership skills. Women now make up more than 40 per cent of the members of the new OPAs established since 2018, which is a significant jump from the first OPAs established in which women only made up 25 per cent of members.

In addition to increasing membership, OPAs are also promoting women’s leadership of the clubs at the village level. OPAs are divided into smaller groups, each of which must have a lead and a sub-lead, one of which must be a woman. At each meeting facilitators must include both women and men. By promoting women’s leadership within smaller groups, the OPAs are effectively developing a pipeline of future women leaders with the relevant skills and experience. The project has also encouraged female leadership in OPA management committees and is now looking to include women within OPA structures at the Union Parishad and District level.

#### **6. Strengthening older people’s voices**

OPAs help older people to gain confidence, advocate for action on their own behalf, and make their interests visible. Public performance and speaking, as well as opportunities to develop leadership roles enable older people to build self-esteem, while other activities help highlight their needs to other older people, the wider community and government. In Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia participants report that after they became aware of the activities of the OPAs they better appreciated the needs of older people.

<sup>3</sup> Howse K, *Older People’s Associations in East and Southeast Asia: A Four Country Study*. HelpAge International, Asia Pacific Regional Office, 2017



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OPAs can also act as a vehicle through which those who may have had no previous access to local or regional authorities can forge new connections and attain a new status within their community. In Bangladesh, the success of OPA campaigns to change the way the Old Age Allowance is distributed and to provide other forms of support, including greater support of OPAs, highlights the impact the groups can have on strengthening older people's voices and ensuring that older people are heard by power holders and responded to.

#### Box 6: OPA campaigning on the Old Age Allowance

In Bangladesh, OPAs in the Rangpur District have adopted a monitoring approach that focuses on identifying the needs of older people in the community and communicating those needs to administrative authorities, monitoring the work of local government officials, and advocating for more (and more equitable) inclusion of older people in government policies, programmes, and services.

In 2015, the chair of the Rangpur regional OPA supported OPA members and stakeholders to engage in a national campaign to change the way the Old Age Allowance (OAA) was distributed. Whereas school children and others were able to receive cash transfers electronically, older people could only access their OAA on one day of the month by going to the bank. This often led to long queues and older people incurring travel costs to reach the bank. On 15 June, OPAs participated in an Age Demands Action (ADA) event which was broadcast on the largest national TV station ATN Bangladesh. The Chairman of Rangpur regional OPA Federation asked the Foreign Affairs Minister and Secretary of Social Welfare why school children and others were receiving e-transfers but not older people.

Following the campaign, the government agreed to change the distribution of the OAA so that it can be collected on any day once the older person has a collection code. The government initially piloted e-transfers in four districts near Dhaka and has now expanded to 16 more districts.

## 7. Valued by stakeholders

Stakeholder organisations recognise the benefits of OPAs. Government entities such as healthcare providers, agricultural extension and social service workers all value the OPAs as important mechanisms to support information-sharing between members and non-members. Stakeholders also believe that OPAs are an effective mechanism through which older people can and do raise their collective profile with local government authorities as well as promoting the increased standing of relevant stakeholders among older people. Additional benefits stakeholders highlight include increased confidence among members, improved access to financial resources through micro-credit loans and club-sponsored community health screenings.

# Key factors for success and replication

## 1. Focus on meeting priority needs

OPAs that focus on meeting the priority needs of older people and their communities have more success in securing active engagement of members. OPA participants, stakeholders and local authorities view the clubs as an investment of time, money and energy. This means that if OPAs do not clearly meet community needs, especially the needs that are defined by the community members themselves as priorities, they will ultimately not be sustainable. In Vietnam, a critical success factor of the ISHC model has been its ability to develop over time and in response to participant feedback so that its activities match the demands and interests of older people in different contexts. Similarly, in Bangladesh one of the most significant strengths of the OPA model has been the adaptability and creativity of those developing it. Coordinators have taken a strategic approach to modify the model and respond to particular issues arising in the local context.

While social engagement is the most commonly identified benefit of OPAs, the opportunity to participate in effective income generating activity plays a critical role in attracting older people to join. In Indonesia, the failure to provide this was a key reason for the drop-out of participants of some OPAs who prioritised alternative income related activities over club membership. Where club income generating activity lead to participating members receiving a significant amount, however, this provided incentive to join and removed the need to prioritise other income earning activities.

Evidence from across the study countries suggests that OPAs may be most effective in boosting existing economic activity rather than developing new ones. Members of supported OPAs and would-be members routinely pointed to the opportunity to secure small loans as one of the most attractive reasons to join the clubs. Most said they used the loans to support existing agricultural or other businesses rather than using them to support new economic activity. This was largely due to limited OPA resources meaning the loan size is very small and the fact that investing in entirely new activity involves increased risk. However, where the size of funds are limited, clubs can still play a role in linking their members to other opportunities in the local area, for example by supporting members to pool micro-loans or by offering large group-based loans that would allow them to set up appropriately financed businesses. In Bangladesh, for example, intergenerational partnerships on loans is strongly encouraged, allowing older participants to share knowledge, experience and expertise while younger partners take on more physically demanding tasks. A group initiative also ensures a larger portion of the community is dedicated towards the businesses' long-term success. It is important to note, however, that group loans involve various risks and require a high level of organisation and trust among borrowers. They are therefore normally only appropriate for OPAs that are more mature.

## 2. Continue monitoring, training and capacity building

Continued monitoring, training and capacity building for newly established OPAs is critical.<sup>4</sup> Where OPAs do not have the benefit of regular and comprehensive training or ongoing support, and the OPAs themselves do not adopt a clear and consistent organisational structure, they appear less likely to be effective or sustainable. The training-of-trainers model adopted within the HelpAge OPA development process offers a cost-effective means for leveraging limited resources and staff to support clubs. Another cost-effective training model is club-to-club exchanges, enabling members to directly learn from one another, including through participating in each other's activities. It is also identified as an effective means for disseminating good practice and local innovation.

Maintaining club records and bookkeeping was identified by some as a challenge, both in terms of time and skills. This was particularly the case where there are low levels of literacy among older members. Developing alternative, more accessible record-keeping methods and training resources, for example web or

<sup>4</sup> As nearly all of the OPAs selected to participate in this study were established within the last 2 years, it has not been possible to evaluate whether and to what extent training is necessary beyond this period.





app-based solutions for urban and semi-urban areas, may be a helpful approach for some OPAs. Intergenerational skills exchange may also be helpful, as long as younger people are not simply replacing older members in doing the tasks.

### **3. Ensure the successful development and transition of club leadership**

Across all research countries a key factor in the ability of OPAs to function effectively is the strength and skills of their leaders. Dynamic, energetic leaders are able to effectively translate the training they received into action during monthly meetings of the clubs and are able to inspire members to join, foster feelings of fun and welcome, and promote a healthy atmosphere within their clubs. Many OPAs have dynamic leaders with useful experience and skills in community organising, social work, healthcare and business development. However, there is a danger that this can lead to OPAs' strength becoming overly dependent on the skills, connections and commitment of individuals. Focusing on building up a pipeline of future leaders and formally developed mechanisms for leadership transition is therefore important. A well-constructed tiered model that is inter-dependent can also help to reduce the burden on leaders while leveraging and developing the skills and connections of other OPA members.

### **4. Adopt genuinely inclusive approaches**

As discussed above, OPAs offer a potentially powerful vehicle to support the goal of leaving no one behind. But in order to meet this potential, they need to take a broad view of inclusion and ensure all older people are supported to be empowered agents of change in their communities.

Across the study countries, a number of barriers to different groups' inclusion within OPAs and OPA activities were identified. Reasons given for some groups of older people not participating in clubs or them not being more "active" members included them feeling that they were too old or too sick, having caring responsibilities, facing geographical or other physical barriers, and challenges related to literacy. In some contexts, the need to work presented a barrier to older people's engagement, despite those individuals representing vulnerable populations that are among those most likely to benefit from OPA activities. A number of practices were identified across the countries to address these issues. The HelpAge ISHCs in Vietnam have membership guidelines that ensure a distribution across socio-economic levels and genders. The membership formula follows a 70-70-70 rule, meaning that in each ISHC 70 per cent of the members are expected to be aged 55 and over (though fewer than 10 per cent over the age of 70), 70 per cent women, and 70 per cent poor, near poor, or disadvantaged. 'Disadvantaged' is intended to be an expansive category that includes people living alone, grandparents acting as the primary caregivers of grandchildren, people with disabilities, and people experiencing other forms of social disadvantage. Some ISHCs also support the inclusion of older people with

disabilities by providing escort services to meetings and other activities, providing documents in large print, seats during exercises and other adaptations that ensure accessibility. At the training for new HelpAge OPAs in Cambodia, intergenerational exchange was identified as a tool for supporting those who are not literate to engage. In Indonesia, where the geographical size of the areas covered by OPAs is often considerable due to the desire to attract the attention and investment of village authorities, OPAs are planning to pilot future clubs at the sub-village level to address physical distance barriers.

Good practice on the engagement of diverse groups should be collected and integrated into OPA training alongside awareness raising and the development of policies and practical skills that enable inclusion to the greatest extent possible. Inclusive practices should also be highlighted when new communities are educated about the benefits of OPAs so that potential members understand how they can engage. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that OPAs and the activities they promote are accessible to the oldest old and older people with disabilities, as well as ensuring that they not only promote gender equity but also adopt gender transformative programmes. This means assessing the needs and interests of women members; whether they are addressed effectively by club programmes and activities; whether women are included in decision making; and whether they believe their input is valued and acted upon.

## 5. Secure support from government and key stakeholders

Support from government and other key stakeholder groups is an important condition in ensuring the sustainability and replication of OPAs. Government or stakeholder support for the OPAs participating in this study ranged from permitting the establishment of an OPA or authorising groups to meet to providing spaces for meetings, sending representatives to participate in or observe club meetings, providing financial or other resource support for clubs such as training programmes, and assisting in the mobilisation of community resources. In Vietnam, where the government adopted national policy explicitly endorsing the ISHC model and mandating that ISHCs be established in every province, stakeholders identified national government endorsement as a key catalyst to local authorities' engagement with and support for expansion of the model (see Box 7). Support from government was also found to a varying degree in other countries.

In Bangladesh, having a committed local partner has been a key mechanism to leverage limited staff resources and support the expansion of OPAs. The Society for Humanity Advancement and Rural Establishment (SHARE) Foundation was founded to focus on community development work but its wholesale adoption of ageing issues into its constitution, and prioritisation and mainstreaming of these issues in all its programming demonstrates the value that can be added by reaching out to potential partners who are not already working on ageing issues and/or for and with older people, but who could and should be.

Engaging diverse stakeholders, including the media, by encouraging them to participate in club activities is another way OPAs have generated interest in and commitment to replication.



### **Box 7: Government and stakeholder support for ISHCs in Vietnam**

Decision 1533 and its legal mandate for the expansion of ISHCs has been a key element in the successful replication of the model in Vietnam. Decision 1533 designates the Association of the Elderly (AE) as the lead organisation responsible for coordinating relevant activities and in mobilising both domestic and international organisations to support their work. Other government entities and organisations are mandated to support the AE in its promotion of ISHCs.

The objectives and activities of the ISHC model match closely with the mission, goals and activities of the AE which creates a natural and powerful partner to support and invest in expansion of the model. The AE is specifically tasked with speaking for and responding to the needs of older people in Vietnam and has administrative representation at the national, provincial, district and local level throughout the country, making it an ideal strategic partner. The experience and capabilities of AE leadership at all levels of government have been additional factors in their ability to mobilise support and resources.

In acting as a foundation to support poverty reduction, social security, advocacy, disaster risk reduction and myriad additional activities, ISHCs also integrate well with many development policies and programmes, and complement the aims of a range of coordinating partners who understand the value of ISHCs in achieving their own goals.

## **6. Invest in mobilising resources**

Stakeholders and club leaders consistently identify the ability to secure financial resources as the most significant challenge to sustaining and expanding the number of clubs over time. Some club leaders also report that they found resource mobilisation one of the most difficult skills to learn when they joined the clubs. Many said they wished they had greater resources so that they could provide more and larger loans and support more disadvantaged members of their communities. Limited resources are seen as a potential risk as the number of clubs grows, particularly where limited resources reduce the amount of training clubs receive or the frequency and quality of monitoring and oversight.

As discussed above, government and other key stakeholder support may be a way to mobilise resources, though this is only the case if resources are available. In Cambodia, for example, government support has been mainly related to policy development.

The skills of club leaders or other supportive advocates in key positions is another area identified as potentially critical in resource mobilisation. However, caution should be taken to ensure OPAs are not too dependent on a single person or a handful of people but rather invest in sustainable approaches.

## **7. Strike a balance between organised structures and freedom for innovation**

A key feature of HelpAge-supported OPAs is that they offer an organised forum that makes clear what members are expected to do. Yet interviews also suggest that allowing flexibility for local innovations is important to ensuring success. Innovations range from small, such as membership badges in Bangladesh, to large, such as OPAs receiving one-time lump sum grants in Indonesia that can be used for group rather than individual businesses. Monitoring, trainings and other support activities should encourage the discussion of local innovations and seek to understand how deviations from the original model function in specific contexts. Striking a balance between enforcing an organised structure governed by consistent policies and allowing local implementers of OPA models the freedom for creative innovation is also key to ensuring OPAs respond to the needs of particular communities.



## 8. Maintain a focus on quality

Focusing on quality is likely to support the expansion of stronger OPAs that better address the needs of local communities and successfully include more marginalised groups of older people. Focusing on quality is also more likely to produce clubs that generate good practice and learning that can be shared, thus supporting the sustainable expansion of the model. In Vietnam, exemplary ISHCs were pointed to as particularly useful in convincing stakeholders and potential members that an ISHC would positively contribute to their community. CMBs and others also routinely expressed a desire to visit another ISHC that they believed they could learn from, or discussed the usefulness of these exchanges when done in the past. Attention to fostering these high quality OPAs is particularly important in areas where few currently exist.

## 9. Build evidence of impact



The success of ISHCs in Vietnam has depended to a large extent on the generation of evidence that demonstrates that ISHCs are valued by members and contribute to healthy communities. Stakeholders within the Vietnam's Association of the Elderly and national and provincial government offices became convinced that ISHCs were worth supporting when they saw evidence of what they termed the clubs' "success". Seeing evidence of success gave them confidence to invest their own resources, including staff time, in supporting the clubs and becoming involved in their activities. Having evidence of benefits flowing from club activities also gave stakeholders the tools with which to advocate for the commitment of resources to the needs and interests of older people.

For some, success was indicated by the interest of older people in joining and participating in the clubs' activities, for others it was the ISHCs' skills in mobilising resources to support club activities or seeing the pride of older people in the clubs and their improved social status within their communities.

The importance of demonstrating evidence of impact in the expansion of the ISHC model in Vietnam highlights that resources should be committed to both quantitative and qualitative data collection and dissemination from the start, and government authorities, local stakeholders and members of the media encouraged to participate in club activities as much as possible to generate interest in and commitment to the replication of OPAs. Increasing opportunities to involve key stakeholders in OPA activities and ensuring that success stories are collected and shared widely could also be valuable tools to support OPA replication going forward.

**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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