

Older people's lives at risk: Addressing the crisis in Mozambique



Key messages

- **The food, fuel and finance crisis has seriously threatened the food security of older women and men in Mozambique.**
- **Most older people in this study reported that sky-rocketing prices made it difficult for them to afford food and other basic necessities.**
- **The impact on older people of rising food prices has been compounded by a fall in their incomes from livestock and agricultural production, and the lack of access to other income sources, such as credit.**
- **The increase in fuel costs along with scarcity of medicines has constrained older people's use of healthcare services.**
- **Escalating climate change impacts and ongoing conflict in Cabo Delgado further exacerbate an already challenging situation for older people, putting them on the brink of destitution.**

Mozambique has experienced many major shocks and stresses in recent years culminating in the current food, fuel and finance crisis. The country's economy has stagnated over the past five years due to a combination of factors, including poor financial performance, extreme cyclical climatic events, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

As of October 2021, the country's Energy Regulatory Authority (ARENE) recorded a steep rise in prices for liquid fuels, including kerosene, petrol and diesel. The sharpest price rise was for Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) widely used for cooking.¹ The price of LPG rose from 58.18 meticaís (about 91 US cents, at current exchange rates) per kilo, to 71.02 meticaís a kilo – an increase of 22 per cent. At the same time, the country witnessed a rise in food inflation from 12.3 per cent in October 2021 to 17.4 per cent in September 2022.²

The situation has been exacerbated by recurrent climate related events, such as drought and tropical cyclone Eloise that destroyed agricultural lands and infrastructure, as well as widespread flooding.³ The ongoing insurgency in the country's northern Cabo Delgado province has also taken its toll on the economy.

The United Nations estimates for 2021 show that the number of older people (60 years old or older) is around 1.35 million.⁴ An already difficult situation of older people has been compounded by COVID-19 related restrictions, which meant some businesses closing and many people losing their jobs. The sharp rise in prices for basic commodities has left consumers, especially older people and their dependents with limited livelihood alternatives.⁵ In addition, the rise in inflation has hit household purchasing power in urban and peri-urban areas, where households tend to be market dependent.

It is expected that many of these impacts will be felt well into 2023. Already, poverty among older people is very high - according to the most recent World Bank data,⁶ Mozambique's poverty headcount ratio is at 46.1 per cent. Given the current context, the prices of major food commodities, such as wheat, edible oil and maize are likely to remain high and volatile into the coming year. And looking ahead, severe drought, flooding, and cyclones are likely to continue.⁷

This policy brief summarises the findings of a study examining the impact of the food, fuel and finance crisis on older people's well-being in Mozambique. The study set out to inform policy making by identifying older people's experiences and concerns. The research was carried out by an external consultancy company, supported by HelpAge International in partnership with the Anglican Church Diocese of Maputo, Associação de Protecção do Idoso de Tete (APITE) and Associação Cristã Interdenominacional para Desenvolvimento da Comunidade (ACIDECO). It studied four locations: Gaza, Manhica, Tete and Maputo. Data collection was carried out in June and July 2022. Research methods included interviews with seven key informants comprising government officials at district and national level; 15 focus group discussions (FGD) comprised of 8-12 people in each group; and one case study.

The impacts of the food, fuel and finance crisis on older people in Mozambique

Our research findings show that, as in other East African countries, older people in Mozambique have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. There are indications that older people - most of whom were in a precarious situation even before the crisis - can no longer afford sufficient food and other amenities to lead a decent and dignified life. Across all 15 FGDs, participants stressed that their ability to buy food was worsening, in particular due to escalating food prices.

A FGD participant from Gaza region recounts: *"Older people are spending their days without food items. In extreme situation, they go to bed without eating, unless they receive some support from a next door"* (FGD5, Participant 1, Gaza, 5 July 2022). Another FGD participant from Sede do Bairro, Tete region, highlighted: *"The food itself has gone down in quality. Now we are eating porridge, wild fruit and we have to work hard to earn money by selling firewood, charcoal and wild fruit. We are weak and life-threatening"* (FGD1, Participant 1, Tete, 4 July 2022).

Key informants participating in the study also highlighted older people's growing inability to afford basic necessities, such as food, medicines and hygiene items as well as agricultural inputs due to the prevailing crisis. A key informant from Manhica noted: *"Older people in Manhica are being impacted negatively by the crisis, combined with floods and the associated crop failure. The rise of the prices in the markets makes older people unable to purchase the basic needs such as food and hygiene items"* (KI1, Participant 1, Manhica, 4 July 2022).

It should be noted that at the time of writing this policy brief, policymakers did not have any data measuring the impacts of the current crisis that they could use to inform their policy responses, which highlights the need for age disaggregated data collection.

These findings are in line with existing evidence, which shows that food insecurity in Mozambique at the time of this research was worsening, as it was in neighbouring countries. In southern regions, agricultural output was affected by drought as well as by tropical cyclones in the central and northern regions and conflict in Cabo Delgado. These events affected the harvest, leading to less food staples in local markets, which in turn led to price rises. In the conflict affected areas of Cabo Delgado, the decline in agricultural output and food crisis has persisted since 2017, and the population in this area still heavily relies on humanitarian assistance.⁸

The impact of the rise in food prices reported by the study participants has been compounded by a fall in older people's incomes. The main sources of income for older people in the study areas are proceeds from livestock and agricultural production. The respondents are finding that their income from these sources had been declining since the buying capacity of their bulk buyers has declined. It has also become more costly to get credit from formal banks; some respondents reported that they were unable to borrow any credit.

The study respondents also described instances when older people had to give away their existing assets to pay their debts. Due to rising interest rates, some are losing assets that they used as collateral when borrowing money to meet their health needs. A FGD member from Sede do bairro, Tete region recounts their situation: *"There is no possibility of debts unless given by an acquaintance. Getting loans became very complicated because even the people who gave us money became financially troubled"* (FGD1, Participant 1, Tete, 4 July 2022).

It has also become difficult for older people to borrow food from shops and pay for it later, as they had previously, for example when they received their pension. A FGD participant in Manhica observed: *"It is not a habit for older people to borrow money, but sometimes they ask for food in the store and then they pay back once they receive their social pension (subsidy). But now, some store owners fear to give them food items for fear that they may not be able to repay. As a result of this, they remain hungry and become upset by thinking that they have no money to cover their daily life needs and consumable thereby aggravating their emotional health"* (FGD 1, Participant 1, Manhica, 28 June 2022).

A government official from the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Action reflected: *"The magnitude of the [food, fuel and finance] crisis is higher since older people are under a lot of pressure arising from challenges to purchase food items. They therefore register their complaints with us regarding delay and the need to increase their social pension payments. In some cases, there are older people who would spend a day without food because they cannot afford food and must seek support from their next-door neighbour"* (KI1, Maputo, 6 July 2022).

The rise in fuel costs has constrained people's ability to use essential services. Our study found that most older people have had to reduce the number of trips they make to purchase essentials and access basic services, such as healthcare, because of the increase in fuel prices. Some respondents only travelled for their most important needs, such as healthcare, while others were not even able to afford the travel costs to health facilities.

Mozambique's health coverage and accessibility are still a challenge and lag behind international standards. For example, one medical doctor covers 17,290 patients per health unit, while the ideal would be 10,000 patients per health unit; the distance covered by patients is on average 12 kilometers, while the ideal would be five kilometers.

The study respondents were especially concerned about how the rise in fuel prices was impacting their use of healthcare, especially in private hospitals. There was a perception among the respondents that their health conditions may increasingly become chronic due to the difficulty of affording health care costs and other social services. The following citation by a FGD participant in Manhica, Maputo province summarises this: *"While the costs for access to healthcare has not changed in public hospitals, this has not been the case with private hospitals, where it has changed significantly. The increase of fuel prices has led to increased cost of transport. The increased cost of transportation is passed to the people through high cost of medicine. Arising from this, older people take a long time to seek*

treatment and cannot purchase their drugs due to the higher prices” (FGD2, Participant 1, Manhiça, 28 June 2022).

Another factor in health-related costs rising is the scarcity of medicines due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, Mozambique’s health system had to divert most of its financial resources to coping with the pandemic. In addition, the breakdown in the global medicine supply chain has reduced the availability of medicines. Older people in Mozambique are entitled to free medicines through pharmacies at public hospitals. However, medicine shortages in the public sector for non-communicable diseases and other chronic illnesses force people to buy the medicines in private pharmacies.

A FGD participant in Gaza province suggested that the high cost of healthcare prompted some people not to seek treatment in formal health facilities and rely instead on traditional medicines: *“Because of the increased cost of health services, older people have had to utilize traditional remedies”* (FGD2, Participant 1, Gaza, 5 July 2022).

A key informant from the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Action observed: *“The ministry is aware that all older people that we support through the social pension are all being affected by the crisis. Even before the crisis, they were living in vulnerable conditions and the pension they receive is not sufficient to cover their daily needs (less than \$10 a month). The current crisis exacerbates their condition”* (KI1, Maputo, 6 July 2022).

Recommendations

Research carried out in Mozambique by HelpAge International examining the impacts of the food, fuel and finance crisis on older people shows that these impacts have been devastating. In particular, the testimonies of older people demonstrate how rising food prices have prevented older people from consuming sufficient amounts of food of high nutritional value. Similarly, the rising fuel prices hinder their access to markets and social services, including health services. Therefore, to prioritise the immediate needs of older people as well as enable longer term policy change, we offer several recommendations that emerge from the research findings.

1. The Government of Mozambique, through the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Action and development partners should continue developing emergency preparedness and response plans to prepare and respond to shocks caused by natural and other hazards (such ‘anticipatory action programmes’ for drought are currently being tested in Chibuto and Guijá in Gaza province, and Marara and Changara in Tete province). Such systems should be extended to trigger emergency humanitarian assistance and support not only in response to climate related events but also to economic stresses – such as those caused by the food, fuel and finance crisis.
2. The Government of Mozambique through the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Action, the National Institute of Social Action (NISA) and other stakeholders should continue developing a comprehensive shock-responsive social protection system. Programmes in such a system could be scaled up to rapidly respond to economic

shocks and cover larger numbers of people and/or enhance the value of benefits. Mozambique has made good progress in developing systems for effective responses to natural hazards, such as data sharing and digital payment mechanisms.⁹ Shock-responsive systems can also be extended to respond to other types of emergencies, such as economic shocks. It is critical that these systems are age-sensitive and can support older people – for example by providing income support and food subsidies for older people to ensure their food security and health is safeguarded during crises. An Oxford Policy Management (OPM) study identifies constraints and opportunities to developing shock-responsive social protection in Mozambique.¹⁰

3. Given the growing frequency and intensity of natural hazards and disasters such as droughts, tropical cyclones, and flooding it is important to take decisive action to build the climate resilience of people and communities and strengthen their ability to sustain their livelihoods in the aftermath of an adverse climatic event. The government through the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Action in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development should improve the livelihoods options of older people through training, extension services and access to productive resources. Making credit available to finance agricultural inputs can help people retain their productive capacity in times of crisis.
4. To mitigate climate change impacts, the Government of Mozambique should support affordable and alternative clean energy solutions which can benefit vulnerable communities - especially older people - with limited or no access to electricity. This will reduce their household expenses and also have significant health benefits, for example, making available clean and efficient cooking stoves or solar energy solutions.
5. The Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Action, other ministries and development partners, should use the newly approved Older People's National Plan (Plano Nacional da Pessoa Idosa 2022-2029) to support livelihood diversification activities for older people. Offering capacity building for older people on alternative income-generation options, can help ensure that if one source of income is lost, they still have options.
6. Data collection initiatives for monitoring the well-being and situation of older people in Mozambique are limited. This makes it challenging to assess the impact of the crisis on older people. Some administrative data are available through the registration of older people receiving a pension, but this covers only a small segment of the older population. Therefore, it is key that the Mozambique National Institute of Statistics implements age and gender disaggregated data collection and makes them available to interested parties for improved policy-making.
7. While qualitative research shows that the impacts of the food, fuel and finance crisis on older people have been severe, further quantitative survey research is necessary to be able to carry out statistical analyses and quantify the extent and key determinants of these impacts. Academic and research institutes should thus prioritise such research alongside other studies to further inform policies affecting older people.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ Kardan A., Bailey S. and Barca, V. (2017) 'Building on social protection systems for effective disaster response: the Mozambique experience'. Policy Brief. Oxford Policy Management, Oxford, UK.

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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