Ageing and the city:

making urban spaces work for older people

Executive summary

Today, more than half of the world's population live in cities, with this proportion set to rise to two-thirds by 2050. The global population is also ageing rapidly, with the numbers of people aged over 60 set to pass the 1 billion mark over the next decade. A significant and growing number of the world's urban residents are older people – more than 500 million. These two trends – urbanisation and population ageing – are occurring most rapidly in low- and middle-income countries.

Research shows that for older people, cities present physical, social and economic barriers that prevent them realising their right to live in dignity and safety, or enjoying their surroundings. Groundbreaking initiatives to make cities more appropriate for older persons, such as the World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities and Communities model, have led to improvements in a number of cities.

Physical accessibility is absolutely essential, but thinking beyond this, what makes shared urban spaces and streets truly inclusive and liveable? What is the relationship between our health in older age and the physical, social and economic urban environment? What makes older people living in cities feel vulnerable to crime or disaster, and how does this affect their daily lives or the assistance they receive in times of crisis? These are some of the questions explored by this report.

The challenges facing urban populations have been rising up the international development agenda. Major global processes – Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, the World Humanitarian Summit and the New Urban Agenda (as part of the Habitat III process) – are united in calling for inclusive urbanisation. Priorities include enabling older people to participate in planning and decision making, to have access to safe and affordable public transport, and to enjoy pleasant, safe and accessible green and public spaces.

Building inclusive cities

Focusing on low- and middle-income countries, this report aims to stimulate discussion about some of the actions that governments and city authorities can take to build truly inclusive cities. It draws on the programme experience of the HelpAge International network across a range of settings, including in Kiev (Ukraine), Beirut (Lebanon), Bogotà (Colombia) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). The research process involved a literature review, engagement with a range of experts and a series of focus group discussions with older women and men in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Mexico City (Mexico), Sukkur and Peshawar (Pakistan).

The rich detail captured in these focus groups helped to inform the three key themes explored in this report:

- **Reclaiming urban spaces for all people** and challenging urban development strategies that prioritise cars and other traffic, which make for hostile and unwelcoming urban spaces that limit physical activity and social interaction.

- **Healthy ageing in urban environments,** focusing on combating the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the impacts of air pollution, and how community-based support can help the increasing numbers of people living with dementia.

- **Urban safety and security in older age** in a context of urban environments increasingly becoming sites of social, economic and political tensions.

Recommendations

The report concludes that a broad range of interrelated interventions can do much to improve urban environments for older people. HelpAge International calls on governments and city authorities to:

- **Create inclusive and enjoyable shared urban spaces that encourage social activity and provide easier access to services and opportunities for all** by reducing car use and traffic speeds, promoting walking and cycling, developing dense, mixed-use communities, and supporting those engaged in street-based livelihood activities. This also includes providing green and public spaces that encourage physical activity and social interaction, and increasing public transport provision that is adequate, accessible, safe and accountable.

- **Promote healthy ageing and tackle the key risk factors linked with urban living** by tackling the high rates of non-communicable diseases in cities through awareness raising and encouraging physical activity and healthy eating, reducing air pollution from all sources, and creating communities that support people with dementia.

- **Help older urban residents feel safe and secure living in a city** by involving older people in disaster preparedness planning, promoting better coordination between humanitarian actors and city authorities to ensure the specific needs of older people are met in times of emergency, and recognising the specific challenges facing displaced older people. Also, cities should consider crime, personal safety and security in planning and policy decisions, particularly in streets and shared spaces and on public transport.