



**AGEING, OLDER PERSONS  
AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**



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## **DISCLAIMER**

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## SECTION 1

# The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Older Persons

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out a universal plan of action to achieve sustainable development in a balanced manner and seeks to realize the human rights of all people. It calls for leaving no one behind and for ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are met for all segments of society, at all ages, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable—including older persons.<sup>1</sup>

Preparing for an ageing population is vital to the achievement of the integrated 2030 Agenda, with ageing cutting across the goals on poverty eradication, good health, gender equality, economic growth and decent work, reduced inequalities and sustainable cities. Therefore, while it is essential to address the exclusion and vulnerability of—and intersectional discrimination against—many older persons in the implementation of the new agenda, it is even more important to go beyond treating older persons as a vulnerable group. Older persons must be recognized as the active agents of societal development in order to achieve truly transformative, inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

The current brief acknowledges the importance of a life-course approach to ageing and calls for protecting and promoting the rights of older persons in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

## SECTION 2

# Population Ageing: Evidence

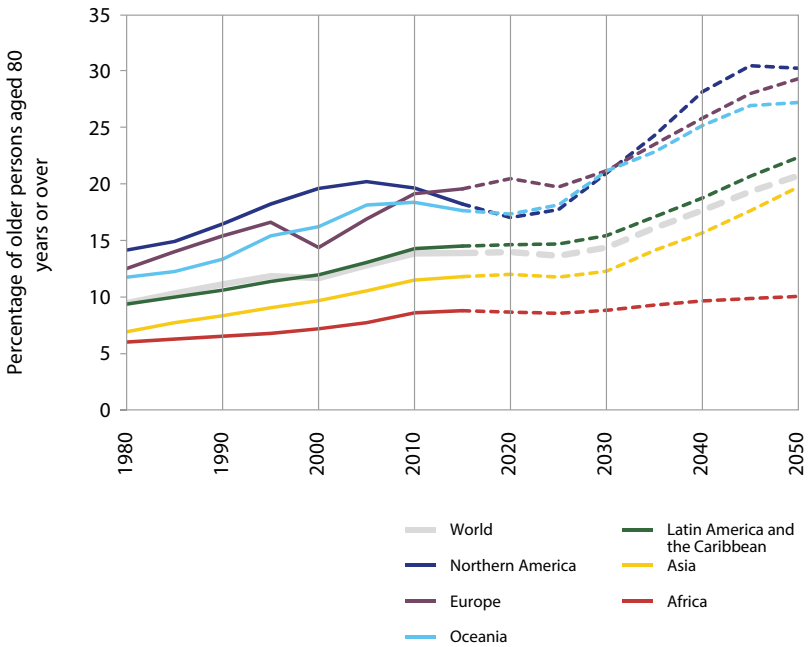
Population ageing is a major global trend that affects all countries, albeit at a different pace and levels (Dugarova and Gülasan 2017; World Bank Group 2016),<sup>2</sup> and reflects significant achievements of human development such as improved health, greater longevity and lower mortality (UN 2017; UNDESA 2007).

In 2015, there were 901 million people aged 60 or over, comprising 12.3 percent of the global population (UNDESA 2015a). While the Asia-Pacific region has the world's largest number of people aged 60 or over (508 million), Europe has the largest percentage of population of this age (24 percent, or 177 million). Although Africa is home to a relatively small number of older persons, it is projected to increase from 64 million to 105 million by 2030. In fact, as public health gains advance in most countries, global life expectancy will continue to increase, contributing to a rise in the number and proportion of older persons in all parts of the world. Between 2015 and 2030, the number of people aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56 percent, reaching 1.4 billion in 2030, which will be nearly 16.5 percent of the global population. By 2030, older persons are expected to account for over 25 percent of the population in Europe and Northern America, 17 percent in Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 6 percent in Africa. At the same time, what matters here is not only the growing number of older persons but also the heterogeneous and complex nature of ageing in view of older persons' health, family and socio-economic status, among others.

An important dimension in population ageing is gender (UN 2017; UNDP 2016; UN Women 2015a). On average, women tend to outlive men, thus comprising a majority of older persons. In 2015, women accounted for 54



**Figure 1** The growing share of the population aged 60 years or over in all world's regions



Source: UNDESA (2015a)

percent of the global population aged 60 years or over and 61 percent of those aged 80 years or over (UNDESA 2015a). At the same time, older women tend to be more marginalized and disadvantaged than older men, with evidence showing higher rates of poverty among older women in both developed and developing countries.<sup>3</sup> Discrimination on the grounds of age and gender is still widespread around the world (UNDESA 2015b; UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).<sup>4</sup> Inequalities in income, access to education, decent work as well as health across the life cycle accumulate and expose many women to poverty in old age, which is further exacerbated by lack of access to or limitations on social security entitlements, and in some cultures, lack of control over financial resources and denial of the right to own and inherit property.<sup>5</sup> In addition, prevailing gender norms and the fact that women tend to outlive the men they marry or cohabit with, mean that they provide the bulk of unpaid care for ageing spouses.

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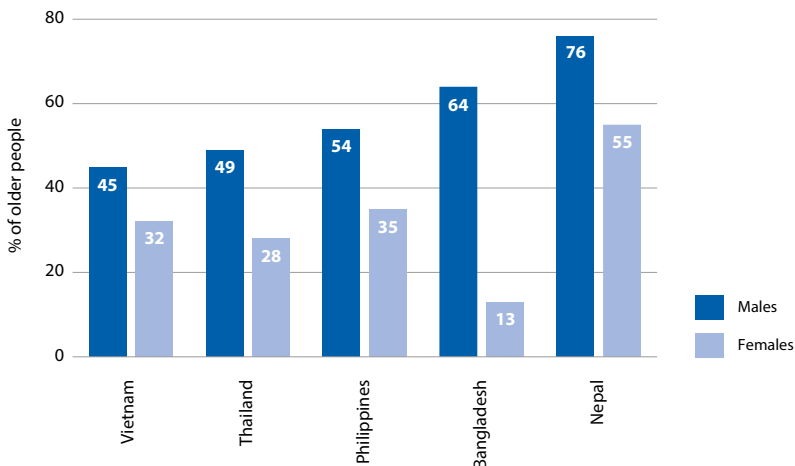
## SECTION 3

# Why Ageing and Older Persons Matter for Development

Population ageing provides significant opportunities for sustainable development which are associated with the active participation of older generations in the economy, labour market and society at large. In view of their experience, knowledge and skills, older persons are important actors in communities, making key contributions in the following interrelated areas:

- **Economic development:** Older persons make substantial contributions to the economy through participation in the formal or informal workforce (often beyond retirement age), taxes and consumption, and transfers of assets and resources to their families and communities,<sup>6</sup> and their broader retention in the workforce (among those who wish or need to continue working) has the potential to enhance labour productivity.<sup>7</sup> Today more older persons are contributing to an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Lee 2017), while embracing new technologies,<sup>8</sup> by providing services through digital platforms, car or accommodation sharing and peer-to-peer lending. In the contexts affected by absence of breadwinners, migration, disease outbreaks and conflicts, older persons' work can be the only source of monetary or in-kind income to sustain families.
- **Unpaid care work:** Older persons, particularly older women, play a vital role in providing unpaid care for spouses, grandchildren and other relatives, including those with disabilities (UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012). Furthermore, with changes in family structures, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and growing migration, grandparents have become central and indispensable to the well-being of families,<sup>9</sup> especially in the absence of public care and other social services.

**Figure 2 A large proportion of older persons aged 60 or above are employed in selected developing countries, but significant gender gaps exist**



Note: Employment is defined as paid work or self-employment, including informal employment but not unpaid care and domestic work. Source: HelpAge International (2016).

- **Political participation:** With variation across contexts, older persons in some countries, notably in advanced democracies, can carry significant weight which is mostly associated with the concentration of economic resources and a tradition of political participation (UNDESA 2007). As older persons continue to constitute an ever-greater proportion of the total population, they have the potential to be more influential in society. This can have important implications for social, economic and political outcomes in those countries (progressive but also regressive), as older persons tend to vote in greater numbers than young people (Goerres 2009), and are increasingly forming their own associations such as lobbying groups, political parties and grassroots organizations (UNFPA and HelpAge International).<sup>10</sup>
- **Social capital:** Many older persons tend to be actively involved in community and civic life through volunteering, governance of public institutions, and participation in community-based institutions. This can contribute to strengthening social capital in terms of facilitating

cooperation and improving interactions within and between groups based on shared values, trust and solidarity (OECD 2007). Older generations are also often the important sources of historical memory and wisdom, guardians of culture, and repositories of social traditions and rare knowledge and skills,<sup>11</sup> which can critically complement those of young people.

With the growing proportion of older persons in the global population, there is greater acknowledgement of the importance of ageing and recognition of the rights of older persons, as evidenced by a number of international mechanisms and initiatives.<sup>12</sup> Despite these efforts, however, older persons have not benefitted systematically from development gains in all contexts, as they tend to be overlooked by development policy and discourse, and their needs and rights are often not sufficiently addressed (UNDP 2016; UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).

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## SECTION 4

# Ageing Challenges

Along with the opportunities and contributions that older women and men present, ageing poses a number of challenges for governments, society and older persons themselves, which require urgent policy responses, as well as anticipatory policy measures to prepare countries for meeting these challenges.

In many national settings, particularly those where the number of older persons is growing fast, population ageing has raised concerns about the ability of countries to provide adequate social protection for older persons (ILO 2014).<sup>13</sup> Population ageing together with the epidemiological transition and related lifestyle changes are among the major factors of the rising incidence and prevalence of non-communicable diseases. This increases the pressure on public health systems to adapt to meet the growing demand for age-appropriate care, including long-term care, services and technologies for prevention, detection and treatment of diseases (WHO 2015). Furthermore, with increased population mobility and urbanization, as well as fewer intergenerational households, the provision of household-based social support is becoming more challenging (UN 2017).

In addition, older persons themselves face multiple challenges that severely restrict their human rights and their contribution to society. Poverty—that is characterized by income insecurity, malnutrition, poor health and lack of access to clean water and sanitation, as well as adequate housing—is a major threat to the well-being of older persons. In later life, people reduce their working hours or stop working because of retirement options, health issues or family responsibilities. Reliance on pensions alone in old age is usually not sufficient to meet basic needs, particularly in developing countries where the benefits that older persons receive are very low or non-ex-

istent (HelpAge International 2016; ILO 2014). Furthermore, while older persons are especially affected by displacement caused by conflict and natural hazards due to reduced physical ability and limited mobility, they are often ignored in humanitarian interventions, placing great risk on their ability to survive and recover (HelpAge International and IDMC 2012).

Another persistent challenge is ageism—prejudice and discrimination towards older persons at individual and institutional levels—that undermines older persons’ status as rights holders including their right to autonomy, participation, access to education and training, health and social care, security and decent employment. Moreover, old age aggravates existing disadvantages that individuals struggle with throughout their lives on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, religion or other factors.

Abuse of older women and men—physical, emotional or financial—has now been acknowledged as a growing concern for all countries, regardless of their level of development (UN 2012; WHO 2016). Despite this recognition, violence, neglect and abuse in old age have received modest attention in policies and research. For example, most studies of violence against women set an upper age limit for data collection at age 49 years, which stems from a traditional focus on women in reproductive age and overlooks violence in older women’s lives.

Gaps in data and statistics on older persons present another important issue, which not only obscures the challenges older persons face, but also risks excluding them from basic services to which older women and men are entitled.

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## SECTION 5

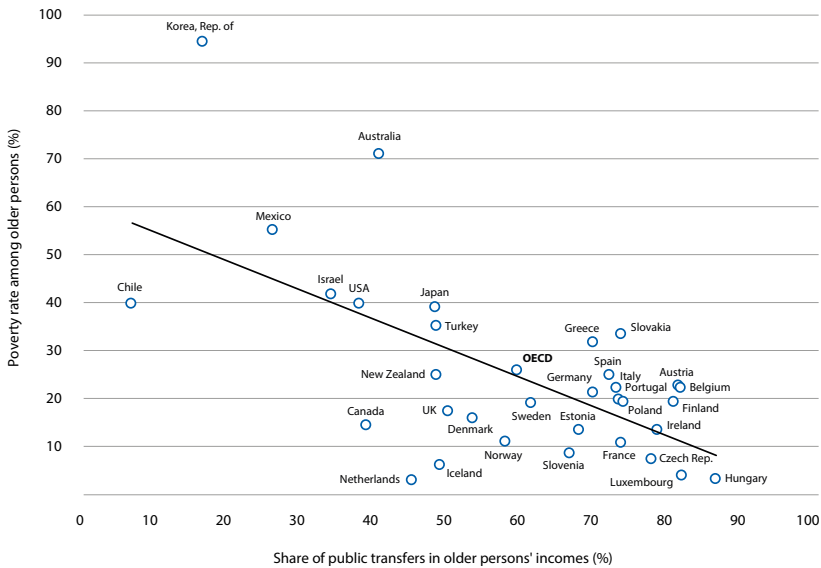
# Policy Implications for the 2030 Agenda

Ageing is likely to have far-reaching implications for all sectors of society, including labour markets, financial and health systems; political participation; demand for goods and services; urban planning and infrastructure development; as well as family structures and intergenerational relations. To ensure progress towards implementing the SDGs, it is essential to prepare for the economic and social transformations associated with ageing and old age, and ensure that the necessary conditions are developed to enable older persons to lead self-determined, healthy and productive lives, and empower them to exercise their right to make decisions and choices in all areas that affect their lives.

A fundamental policy and attitudinal shift on ageing and old age is therefore needed to reflect and promote the contributions of older persons to society. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of ageing, public debates and policies must promote older persons and their agency as a solution to many development challenges. The process of reaching out to older persons and overcoming marginalization and intersectional discrimination requires an integrated and multifaceted approach, including sensitization of power structures, investing in public education, enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation and articulating in a compelling manner the gains for society if older persons are included in the development process.

Ending poverty in old age will require an expansion of social protection provisions and benefits (ILO 2014), inclusion in the formal labour markets, broader opportunities based on older persons' skills, knowledge and experience, and acknowledging (and compensating for) the unpaid services provided by them. Significant efforts to promote decent work for all should be accompanied by measures to strengthen the ability of older

**Figure 3** Correlation between greater public pension provision and lower poverty levels in OECD countries



Source: ILO (2014)

persons to maintain an adequate standard of living independent of their family status and labour market trajectories. Initiatives and investments to enable older persons to access services such as health, care, transport and housing are also needed.

As the proportion of the world's population in the older ages continues to increase, the need for improved information and analysis of population ageing is growing. Knowledge is essential to assist policymakers to define, formulate and evaluate goals and programmes, and to raise public awareness and support for required policy changes. Therefore, there is an urgent need to bolster the collection, analysis and use of good quality data on age and ageing to effectively evidence the equitable delivery of the SDGs.

Population ageing requires urgent action. Recognition of older persons' agency and acknowledgement of their human rights call for establishing the policies that not only address the issues related to the current popu-

lation of older persons but also anticipate the increase in numbers of the present generations as they age, across the life course.

Through partnerships, research and initiatives, UN agencies can:

- Mainstream ageing issues in their programmes of work, while stressing the need to ensure that the rights of older persons, including to income, health, education, security, voice and participation are addressed;
- Adopt an explicit life-course approach in their research portfolios that is used to support guidance, programmes and projects, while ensuring that more attention is paid to the situation of older persons by programmes;
- Build in the intersection of ageing with other critical issues including poverty, health, gender, decent work, inequalities, disability, environment, governance and conflict;
- Enhance coordination and cooperation with global and regional intergovernmental organizations, bi- and multi-lateral development partners, international and national non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academia and other relevant stakeholders to develop sustainable partnerships and promote dignified ageing and issues related to older persons, while building on existing good practices in terms of global platforms, coalitions and agreements on shared programmes of work;
- Support better collection, analysis, dissemination and use of age-disaggregated data; and advocate for the inclusion of data on ageing in national instruments, policies and reporting;
- Encourage national and local policy development and implementation to be human rights-based, age-sensitive and all-age-inclusive, with measurable indicators to track progress on the situation of older persons.

With collective efforts, UN agencies, policymakers, civil society and other stakeholders can support setting a new agenda of active and healthy ageing that can reduce the vulnerabilities and enhance the rights, capabilities and resilience of older persons, and thus fulfil the pledge of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind.



## NOTES

- 1** The concept of “old age” is multidimensional, which includes chronological (based on a birthdate), biological (related to human body ability), psychological (concerned with psycho-emotional functioning) and social age (related to social roles such as grandparents). This brief adopts the definition of the United Nations that uses 60 years or over to refer to older persons, while recognizing the diversity of older persons in terms of their needs, capabilities, lifestyles, experiences and preferences that are shaped by their age, gender, health, income, education, ethnicity and other factors.
- 2** Population ageing takes place alongside other megatrends such as persistent poverty, rising inequalities within countries, climate change, conflicts and migration (Dugarova and Gülasan 2017), which affects the conditions under which people age, their ability to contribute, as well as their vulnerabilities.
- 3** Higher poverty rates among older women can be explained by lower rates of labour market participation, lower average earnings, higher incidence in informal employment, lack of social protection and unpaid domestic labour (ILO 2014; UN 2007; UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012). These factors are often magnified by the design of pension systems which require regular pay-roll contributions or include long ‘vesting periods’ to be eligible for minimum pensions (UN Women 2015b).
- 4** Age-based discrimination has been found, for example, in relation to recruitment, retention and retraining of workers (UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012). A 2012 survey of 26,500 older people across Europe showed that 21 percent had experienced or witnessed discrimination at work because they were perceived as being too old (European Commission 2012).
- 5** In many developing countries, for example, statutory and customary laws continue to restrict women’s access to land and other assets, and women’s control over household economic resources is limited (UNDESA 2015b). Furthermore, in almost a third of developing countries, laws do not guarantee the same inheritance rights for women and men (*ibid.*), and in situations where, for instance, women survive their husbands, they may not automatically inherit their spouses’ assets, if there are any, due to discriminatory legal practices (CEDAW 2015).
- 6** To encourage individuals to remain economically active into old age, many developed countries have been increasing the age of retirement (UNDESA 2009). In developing

countries, a large proportion of older persons continue working into old age, as they do not have access to social security systems and it is often the only way to make ends meet, sometimes despite ill health (HelpAge International 2016). To promote older persons' employment, a number of countries eliminated age barriers through age anti-discrimination legislation, introduced various programmes such as senior talent markets and universities of the third age, and carried out measures such as education and training, career counselling, job creation and flexible working schemes (UN 2017; UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).

- 7** Empirical evidence suggests that an older workforce in Sweden was compatible with rapid increases in productivity (Malmberg et al. 2008). Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, the contributions of older persons through taxation, consumer spending and other economically valuable activities such as social care provision and volunteering were estimated to be worth nearly GBP 40 billion in 2010, which is more than expenditure on them through pensions, welfare and health care combined, and this number is set to rise to GBP 77 billion by 2030 (Cook 2011). In most sub-Saharan African countries, older persons constitute a substantial proportion of smallholder farmers, which makes them critical for ensuring food security (Aboderin and Beard 2015).
- 8** In the United Kingdom, for example, 45 percent of 55-75 year-olds were reported to spend up to 30 hours per week online and 47 percent communicated via Skype or instant messenger services, while in the Turkana region of Kenya, older persons used new technology to receive cash transfers through the Hunger Safety Net Programme (UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).
- 9** For example, studies show that 69 percent of Bolivian migrants who moved to Spain left their children at home, usually with grandparents; in rural China, grandparents look after 38 percent of small children whose parents had gone to cities for work; and in some parts of Colombia, around a third of internally displaced older persons were responsible for caring for grandchildren (UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).
- 10** In developing contexts, these associations also allow members to access microcredit, health services, business loans and job training, while creating social support networks (UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).
- 11** For example, older persons in rural areas often have expertise in farming practices and know how to cope with environmental shocks and food shortages, which can be vital for rural communities to survive in times of crisis (UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).
- 12** The major ones include the 1982 Vienna International Plan of Action, the 1991 UN Principles for Older Persons, the 1994 International Conference on Population and

Development Programme of Action, the 1999 UN International Year of Older Persons, the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), the establishment of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing in 2010, and the creation of the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Older Persons in 2013.

- 13** Extending pension systems has proved critical in assuring income security in older age, as part of a wider effort to extend social protection and reduce poverty among older people (ILO 2014; UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012). However, in many developing countries only a small proportion of the older population is covered by old-age pensions mainly due to the informality of the labour market (ibid). The situation of older people in developing contexts is further undermined by the fact that there are few resources to distribute (Herrmann 2015).

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