



# Older people count: Making data fit for purpose

## Key messages

- Current data systems are not fit for purpose in today's ageing world. Data on older women and men is often not collected. When it does exist, it is not fully analysed, reported or utilised, leading to the absence of issues affecting older people in policies and development interventions.
- The current review of the Millennium Development Goals and the process to agree a new set of Sustainable Development Goals post-2015 provides an opportunity to better understand and highlight a range of challenges in relation to data on older women and men, and to offer solutions.
- Global coordinated action is needed at all levels of the data system from collection to utilisation, and from all stakeholders, to improve the quality and range of data on older women and men.
- The call for a “data revolution” to underpin an inclusive new Sustainable Development Framework is the ideal opportunity to ensure that issues affecting older women and men are included in line with efforts to “leave no one behind”.

Global AgeWatch Policy Briefs provide authoritative and evidence-based guidance to international and national policy makers to deliver the rights of older people and respond to their needs.

**Global AgeWatch**  
[www.globalagewatch.org](http://www.globalagewatch.org)

**HelpAge  
International**

age helps

## Why older people count

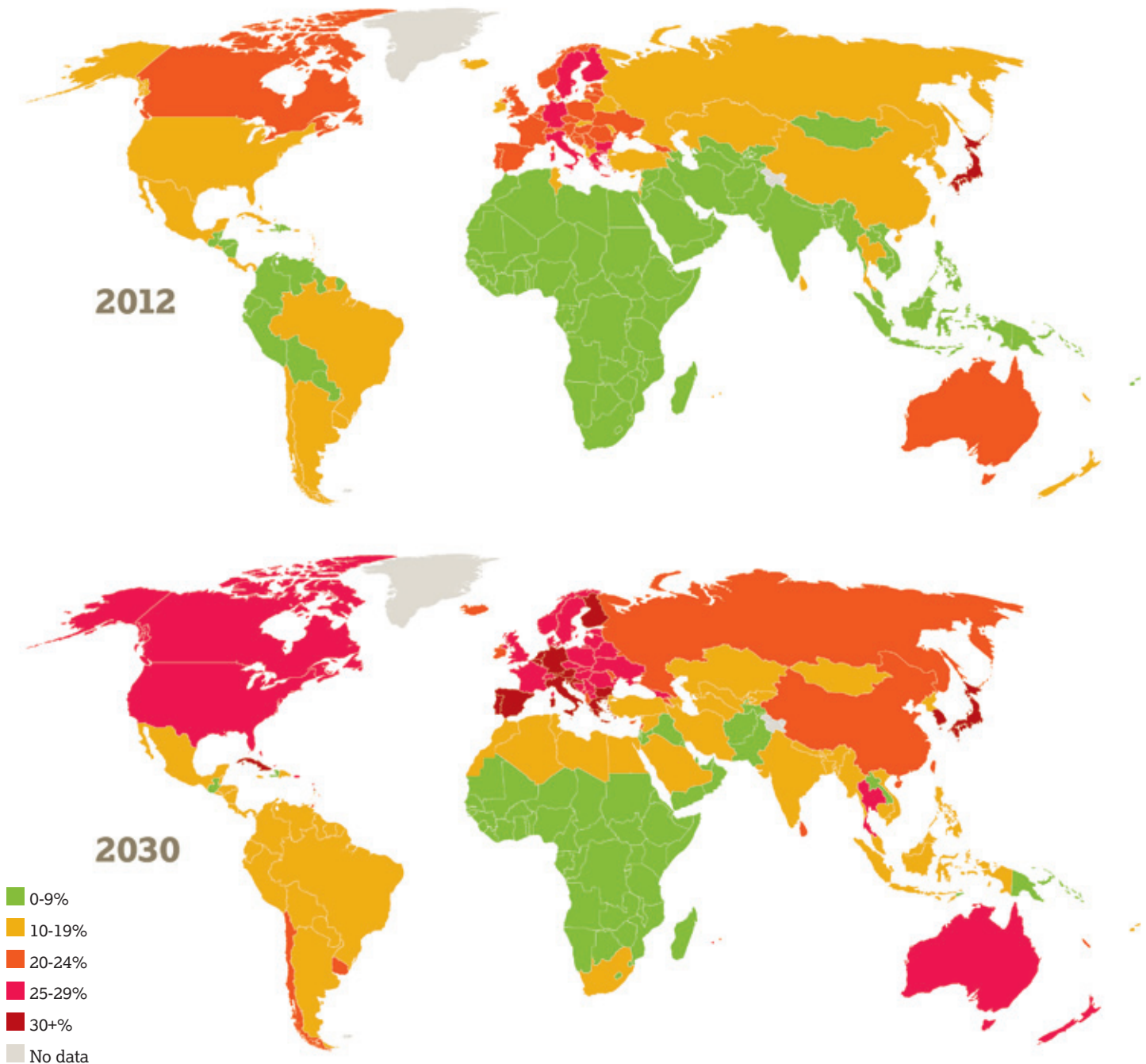
The world is ageing. In 2012 there were 810 million women and men aged 60 and over worldwide. This figure is projected to reach 1 billion in less than ten years and 1.375 billion by 2030, meaning that people aged 60 and over will constitute 16 per cent of the global population (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> By 2030 there will be more people aged 60 and over than children under 10.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide the proportion of older women and men is growing at a faster rate than the general population. Population ageing is happening in all regions of the world. It is progressing fastest in developing countries. Of 15 countries that currently have more than 10 million older people, seven are developing countries.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, despite this trend, older women and men are still not included in data collection mechanisms and datasets. Many population-based surveys focus on younger people, usually aged 15-49, leading to a lack of data on people aged 50 and over. This has a number of implications. First, this lack of data means that the situation of older women and men is often invisible, making it difficult to document and address entrenched patterns of discrimination.<sup>4</sup> Secondly where data is collected on older people, it is often not disaggregated by age (or sex). Both of these situations lead to a lack of understanding and a subsequent failure to include older women and men in many policies and development interventions.

**Policy Brief 4**

This is why the “data revolution”, which was called for to underpin an inclusive new Sustainable Development Framework, is the ideal opportunity to ensure issues affecting older women and men are included. Age needs to be taken into account as a cross-cutting issue in all goals and targets.<sup>5</sup> This would take forward the UN Secretary General’s recommendation in his 2013 report to Member States on the Millennium Development Goals and new development framework, that policy responses are needed in countries with ageing populations to support older women and men “so as to remove barriers to their full participation in society while protecting their rights and dignity”.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1: Proportion of population aged 60-plus in 2012 and 2030**



Source: UNDESA Population Division, Population Ageing and Development 2012, Wall Chart, 2012

Note: The boundaries shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

## The challenge of data

The “data revolution” debate provides an opportunity to understand and address a range of challenges on data on older women and men, evident across different aspects of data systems.

- 1. Collection of data** at national level by governments. There are a range of constraints to the collection of data on older women and men, including insufficient recognition of this issue and inadequate funding, resulting in older people often being excluded from data collection mechanisms. For example, Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) only collect data on people between the ages of 15-49, leading to a lack of data on issues fundamental to older people’s wellbeing.
- 2. Analysis of data** at national level by governments and at international level by UN agencies and other global partners. When data is collected it is not always disaggregated and analysed by age. Where disaggregation does occur, there is often a lack of consistency in the age ranges applied, leading to challenges for data comparison of international datasets, including in health, employment and economy. For example, although Labour Force Surveys collect data for all people of working age (based on country definitions), data is rarely analysed for the older age cohort, and age disaggregation applied to younger age groups is rarely seen for those aged 65 and over.
- 3. Reporting of data** at international level by UN agencies. Where global indicators are restricted to a specific age group, international reporting focuses on this group, excluding additional data that may be collected and available at the country level. For example, data available at the country level on older women and men and HIV is often not included in global reports on the HIV epidemic.
- 4. Utilisation of data** by governments and other actors. When data is available on older women and men it is not always utilised or acted upon in policies and programmes. For example, agricultural censuses collect and disaggregate data by age, but very few census reports have included any detailed analysis on the situation of ageing rural populations or addressed their contributions and needs in rural development, food security or social protection policies.

## Implications for older women and men

The exclusion of older women and men from surveys, datasets and reporting has resulted in their invisibility in the global development agenda. The lack of data has meant that too little is known about the challenges that older people face and the support they need, and there is a lack of awareness of the appropriate ways in which to support ageing populations. This lack of visibility and knowledge further leads to the absence of older women and men in policies, development interventions and services at all levels, as the following examples demonstrate:

- **Living with HIV** Global HIV epidemic monitoring and reporting focuses on people between the ages of 15 and 49. The resultant lack of data on how many older women and men are living with HIV has led to very few HIV strategies in low- and middle-income countries addressing their needs<sup>7</sup> and their almost complete exclusion from the HIV response, despite the fact that they face the same risks as any other population group. Older people are rarely targeted in prevention strategies and are far less likely than younger people to practise safer sex.<sup>8</sup> Rates of HIV testing uptake are lower in older people. For example, 18 per cent of women aged 50 and over in Swaziland have tested for HIV in comparison with 40.7 per cent of women aged 15-49.<sup>9</sup> Little is known about whether older people have equitable access to anti-retroviral therapy (ART).
- **Violence against women** Surveys on violence against women rarely collect data after the age of 49, leading to very limited data on the situation of older women.<sup>10</sup> This critical information gap has significant implications. It makes it impossible for States to monitor progress on their human rights obligations towards women of all ages on freedom from violence. It conceals patterns of violence against older

women and results in their subsequent exclusion from prevention and rehabilitation policies and programmes. For example, in the 15-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, only four countries out of a sample of 121 specifically mentioned older women in their national responses to violence against women.<sup>11</sup>

- **Poverty in older age** The collation and analysis of household data to measure poverty among older women and men has improved over recent years, with work undertaken internationally and a number of studies at regional and national levels.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, there is still limited discussion, let alone consensus, on the assumptions that should be used to measure old-age poverty.<sup>13</sup> As a result, there are numerous examples where analysis has drawn conclusions about older people being less poor than the rest of the population, without due consideration of the importance of assessing the assumptions used. In some cases, these assumptions have influenced social protection policy at national level, for example, a deprioritising of social protection for older women and men, even if these results have later been disproved.
- **Humanitarian and emergency situations** Older women and men are often overlooked during emergencies due to lack of data on the age distribution of the affected populations and insufficient consultation with the community. Countries and communities often lack baseline statistical information on the age distribution and health status of their population prior to an emergency.<sup>14</sup> Data collected during humanitarian and emergency situations is often only disaggregated by age in two cohorts, up to and over five years of age, leading to a lack of awareness of the number of older women and men affected and the type of support they need.

## The response to the data challenge

Where data is collected for older women and men, and effectively analysed and disaggregated, it tells an important story about their situation. A number of initiatives demonstrate this:

### Global AgeWatch Index

In 2013, HelpAge developed the Global AgeWatch Index. Recognising that existing indexes do not effectively capture the needs of ageing populations, HelpAge produced the Index to highlight the quality of life and wellbeing of older people around the world. The Global AgeWatch Index brings together a unique set of internationally comparable data based on older people's income and health status, education, employment and aspects of the enabling environment, including physical safety and civic participation. These areas have been identified by older women and men as key enablers to their wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

The Global AgeWatch Index includes data on 91 countries across the world, representing 89 per cent of people aged 60 and over. It illustrates their social and economic progress and where improvements can be made. Data for each of the countries is presented on the Global AgeWatch website as a country report card, enabling users to access information on each specific indicator, at: [www.globalagewatch.org](http://www.globalagewatch.org)

The Index highlights a number of key issues. While European and North American countries populate the top 10 positions in the Index and African and East Asian countries generally fare less well, there are exceptions to this pattern. The Index highlights lower-income countries that, regardless of their level of wealth, have invested in policies that have positive impacts for their ageing populations. For example, despite Bolivia being one of the poorer countries in the Index, its progressive policy environment for older women and men, with a National Plan on Ageing, free healthcare for older people and a non-contributory universal pension, ranks more highly than might be expected.

The Index not only emphasises the importance of age in data collection and analysis but also exposes the limitations of existing data. Sufficient data was only available in international datasets for 91 countries, resulting in many countries not being

included. The gaps in data collection at the national level and in international datasets call into question the capacity of governments and other stakeholders to make informed and appropriate policy decisions affecting older people, and highlight the need for change in the way data systems work. The lack of disaggregation by sex also meant that it was not possible to analyse the different situations of older women and men.

### **HIV data on older women and men**

A major challenge for older women and men living with and affected by HIV is lack of data. With little data collected on people aged 50 and over – from basic prevalence to information on their attitudes, knowledge and behaviour – the nature and scale of the epidemic among women and men aged 50 and over has remained largely unknown, leaving researchers and policymakers unable to meet their needs.<sup>16</sup>

Over recent years, academic research has been conducted that begins to highlight the extent to which older women and men are affected by HIV. A 2010 analysis showed that just over 3 million people aged 50 and over were living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>17</sup> the first study to give specific estimates at the national and regional level. A further study projects that this figure will increase to over 9 million by 2040.<sup>18</sup> The availability of this data has helped to raise awareness of the impact of HIV on older women and men and to demonstrate the need for improved data at national and global level.

UNAIDS undertook significant new work in 2013 on HIV and ageing. An analysis and modelling exercise was conducted to provide new data on people aged 50 and over living with HIV worldwide, published in the report, *HIV and Aging: A special supplement to the UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic 2013*. UNAIDS also requested the template for DHS be amended to include people aged 50 and over, a major step towards changing one of the data mechanisms that currently excludes older women and men.

### **Partnership and collaboration**

Collaboration between governments and other development partners engaged in the collection, analysis, reporting and utilisation of data is key to improving data on older women and men. Some examples are as follows:

- HelpAge is working with the Global Health and Global Nutrition Clusters to include specific indicators on older women and men in the Humanitarian Indicators Registry. Working with the Global Food Security Cluster and a number of partners, HelpAge is also developing tools and training materials to support agencies to better collect and analyse sex- and age-disaggregated data in emergency food security programming. Policy developments within the humanitarian sector are further committing partners to better data collection. ECHO's Gender-Age Marker requires all proposals submitted to include both collection and analysis of disaggregated data at all phases of the programme cycle.
- The World Bank has increased its work to collate comparable household data, including indicators relating to old-age poverty. This data was critical to the development of the Global AgeWatch Index. The recently formed Social Protection Statistics and Indicators Inter-Agency Working Group, a multi-stakeholder group with agency and civil society representation, will also play a key role in continuing efforts to collate and systematise social protection statistics, including those relating to old age. HelpAge International also collates and shares data on pensions through its Pension Watch website ([www.pension-watch.net](http://www.pension-watch.net)), an online resource that includes an interactive database of social pension schemes worldwide.
- The World Health Organization coordinates the Study on global AGEing and adult health (SAGE) as part of an ongoing programme of work to compile comprehensive longitudinal information on the health and wellbeing of adult populations and ageing. SAGE brings together governments, UN and academic bodies to collect data on people aged 50 and over, including a smaller comparison sample of people aged 18-49, from nationally representative samples in six countries: China, Ghana, India, Mexico, Russian Federation and South Africa.

**Policy Brief 4**

We are grateful to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for providing financial and technical support for this brief and to Edilberto Loaiza and Ann Pawliczko of UNFPA for reviewing the draft.

**This policy brief was written by Rachel Albone with contributions from Sylvia Beales and Aleksandr Mihnovits**

**Rachel Albone**

HIV and AIDS Policy Adviser,  
HelpAge International  
ralbone@helpage.org

**Sylvia Beales**

Head of Strategic Alliances,  
HelpAge International  
sbeales@helpage.org

**Aleksandr Mihnovits**

Global AgeWatch Assistant  
amihnovits@helpage.org

Photo: Frédéric Dupoux/  
HelpAge International  
Design: TRUE

You may quote or reproduce material from this publication with due acknowledgement to HelpAge International, unless indicated otherwise.

Copies of this policy brief are available at:

**www.globalagewatch.org**

HelpAge International  
PO Box 70156  
London WC1A 9GB, UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778  
Fax +44 (0)20 7387 6992

**www.globalagewatch.org**

Registered charity no. 288180  
Copyright © HelpAge International 2014

**ISBN 1 872590 23 3**

## Recommendations

The absence of older women and men in many data systems may reflect wider discrimination on the basis of older age and a culture of ageism, and must be recognised and challenged. Global coordinated action is needed at all levels of the data system from collection to utilisation and from all stakeholders to improve the quality and range of data on older women and men. The “data revolution” must ensure that the data system is fit for purpose in today’s ageing world, enabling governments, donors, UN agencies, civil society, communities and older women and men themselves to address the challenges of global ageing. The following specific changes are needed:

- Increased commitment from governments to include older women and men in surveys, to fully analyse data by age, to report data disaggregated by age and sex, and to utilise data to inform policy changes and interventions to meet the needs of ageing populations
- Increased coordination at the national level between government ministries to allow for the better utilisation and management of data
- Increased commitment from actors within the international system to the analysis, reporting and utilisation of data on older women and men in international datasets with disaggregation and analysis that enables comparison between regions and countries
- Increased commitment from UN agencies to include older women and men in global indicators
- Increased funding and partnerships to allow for the systematic collection, analysis and reporting of data on older women and men
- The amendment of internationally held and managed survey templates and data collection mechanisms, including DHS and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), to include older women and men
- Improved partnerships with all relevant stakeholders including the private sector and academia, to improve analysis of, and access to existing datasets
- Prioritising efforts to enable older women and men to utilise existing data
- Investing in data analysis and presentation to ensure that data is accessible, transparent and socially accountable to people of all ages

## Endnotes

1. Gorman M and Zaidi A, *Global AgeWatch Index 2013: Insight report*, London, HelpAge International, 2013, p7

2. UNDESA, World Population Prospects: the 2012 revision, 2013

3. *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge*, United Nations Population Fund, New York and HelpAge International, London, 2012, p12

4. Samman E and Rodriguez-Takeuchi LK, *Old age, disability and mental health: data issues for a post-2015 framework*, ODI Background Note, 2013

5. ‘Sustainable Development in an Ageing World: A call to UN Member States on the development agenda beyond 2015’, HelpAge International, 2013

6. ‘A life of dignity for all: accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015’, Report of the Secretary-General, 28 July 2013, Doc A/68/202, paras 92 and 111

7. *HIV and Aging: A special supplement to the UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic 2013*, UNAIDS, 2013

8. Schmid G et al, ‘The unexplored story of HIV and ageing’, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 87:162-162, 2009, doi: 10.2471/BLT.09.064030

9. Swaziland demographic and health survey 2006-07, Government of Swaziland, 2008, [www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FR202/FR202.pdf](http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FR202/FR202.pdf)

10. *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, World Health Organization, 2013 [www.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625\\_eng.pdf](http://www.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf)

11. Sleaf B, *Older women and Beijing: 15 years on*, HelpAge International, 2010

12. See, for example, Kakwani N and Subbarao K (2005), *Ageing and poverty in Africa and the role of social pensions*, International Poverty Centre; Pestieau P, Ali R and Dethier J-J (2010), *Universal Minimum Old Age Pensions: Impact On Poverty And Fiscal Cost In 18 Latin American Countries*, World Bank

13. For discussion of this issue see Haque Khondker B, Knox-Vydmanov C and Vilela A (2013), *Old age social protection options for Bangladesh*, Volume 1, Bureau of Economic Research of the University of Dhaka and HelpAge International

14. *Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An essential brief for humanitarian actors*, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2008

15. *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A celebration and a challenge*, Chapter 4

16. Bendavid E, Ford N and Mills EJ, ‘HIV and Africa’s elderly: the problems and possibilities’, *AIDS* 26, 2012

17. Negin J and Cumming R, ‘HIV infection in older adults in sub-Saharan Africa: extrapolating data from existing data’, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 88:11, November 2010, pp847-853

18. Hontelez JAC et al, ‘The impact of antiretroviral treatment on the age composition of the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa’, *AIDS* 26, 2012, ppS19-S30