

The rights and needs of older people in the occupied Palestinian territories:

A situational analysis

Increasing longevity is one of the great achievements of humankind, but the demographic shift towards growing older populations also presents considerable economic, cultural and social challenges to the global community. Individual countries need to respond to population ageing by adopting new approaches to age-related issues and ensuring effective integration of ageing within the national development process. To encourage a more age-friendly world, in 1991 the United Nations (UN) approved five principles on older persons (independence, participation, care, self-realisation and dignity) and called on governments to incorporate these principles into national policies. In 2002, the UN adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

Since then, many countries globally and in the Arab world have made considerable advances in this area, with profound and positive impacts on older people. Measures adopted include legislation on pension funds and social security systems, tax breaks on facilities for older persons, free health insurance, welfare services, education and training programmes, specialisations in age-related diseases in university faculties, financial support for older people to live in their own homes or with relatives, and awareness and celebration of the International Day of Older Persons.

HelpAge International and the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) initiated a report to ascertain the current living conditions experienced by older people in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), and to conclude recommendations with practical and realistic applications for future age-related programmes and policy guidelines.

The report adopted a descriptive analytical approach. Research tools included a desk review of the relevant literature, alongside participatory research tools (semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with older people and government service providers in the MoSA, Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Labour (MoL), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and with legislators and policy makers). Demographic data are complemented with analysis of the existing environment and services provided by the MoSA and other ministries, UNRWA and civil society organisations.

The statistical analysis clearly demonstrates that Palestinian society, with a population of 4.68 million people, is still a youthful society with a high dependency ratio. People aged 60 or over constitute 4.5 per cent of the population with a total of 210,000 individuals. Of these, 14.5 per cent participate in the labour force and around two-thirds are married. One sixth of families are headed by an older person. Illiteracy is widespread among older people and women bear a disproportionate burden due to the prevalence of poverty.

The report identifies existing failures to secure full protection for the fundamental human rights of older people in the oPt, or even to adhere to international recommendations such as the United Nations five principles for older people referred to above. The status of the oPt in HelpAge International's Global AgeWatch Index for 2015 was very low: the West Bank and Gaza Strip were ranked 93 out of 96 participating countries.

Care providers comprise governmental and civil bodies, the private sector and international organisations. Residential homes or day clubs offer few special services and weaknesses are apparent in the infrastructure of residential centres and institutions, indicating considerable discrepancy between existing services and what older people need. The huge responsibility to protect the rights of older people requires communication, coordination and follow-up by all stakeholders.

A research centre is needed to conduct specialist studies on older people. Currently no database exists to serve the planning and development process, monitor the status of older people or support their needs in times of crisis and disasters.

Legislation on public health and the health insurance system make no specific references to older people as a specific group. Disruption to the work of the Palestinian Legislative Council has delayed the approval of laws drafted to regulate the status of older people. Chronic diseases are increasingly widespread and are responsible for the majority of older deaths. From an epidemiological statistical point of view, the spread of these diseases among older people is very high in



comparison with other age groups. Medical school curricula do not cover geriatrics and there are no specialist geriatric doctors.

There are no political policies or formal programmes to support participation by older persons in development. The Social Security Law and the Pensions Law governing public pensions in the public, civil and military sectors require ratification, and retirement policies for employees in Israel's labour market seem likely to remain dormant. Sources of income vary among older people, but reliance on family care is common. Residential care homes and day centres care for the homeless, although these facilities are limited in number and capacity. There are no programmes to encourage volunteer work with older people and there are many constraints that restrict engagement in daily activities. Adaptations to houses to assist older people with home-based care are not available.

The conditions faced by older people in the Gaza Strip are particularly dire due to the prevailing political, security and economic problems, and older people are much more vulnerable to acts of abuse and violence than in the West Bank.

Summary of recommendations

- Establishment of a leadership body such as the Ministry of Social Affairs or the National High Committee for Older People to oversee the implementation of work related to the ten priority actions identified in the *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and a Challenge* report published by UNFPA and HelpAge International.
- A comprehensive mid-term national programme for the care for older people. This programme should take into account cross-cutting challenges, potential responses, and the actions identified by the Arab Plan of Action on Ageing for incorporating the human rights of older people into policy making and planning for social, healthcare and economic aspects.
- The government should accelerate the enactment of a law for older people. Adequate funding must be provided for the activities proposed in existing or current strategic plans for older people and for social protection. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Affairs should coordinate to provide retirement schemes, free health insurance and workers' allocations.
- All institutions must play an active role in strengthening national capacity on ageing and adopting age-friendly policies.

- From an economic standpoint, plans must be introduced to employ older persons and take advantage of their expertise and skills post-retirement. Older people need income security in the form of a pension or financial assistance linked to the cost of living and minimum wages. Also, a relief response must be prepared to meet the emergency needs of older people in the Gaza Strip due to the impact of ongoing wars and violence.
- Take advantage of positive factors such as religious faith, strong family unity and volunteering within communities.
- Determine a standard definition of older people as 60 years or over for the purposes of retirement, studies and the identification of needs.
- Combat age discrimination.
- Discussions between the government and stakeholders to distribute tasks and responsibilities between them.
- Training for employees in health and social services to create professional human resources for older care.
- Healthcare providers need to unify their health programmes and develop standard national protocols
- The range of services provided needs to be expanded to focus on developmental aspects and the rehabilitation of older people.
- The establishment of services for healthcare and home-based care dedicated to older people and the provision of free health insurance.
- Provide age-friendly physical environments to facilitate access to homes and services in hospitals, banks and public buildings.
- Promote good mental health and counselling services.
- Establish more residential centres, day clubs and leisure activities for older people.
- Promote awareness about older people to eradicate negative attitudes and stereotypes in society.

The challenges faced in the oPt are considerable, but the need for reform is pressing in the face of future demographic shifts and the projected increase in the older population. The recommendations of this report respond to the needs voiced by older people and provide a framework of priority actions for all stakeholders to ensure that ageing issues are incorporated into national development plans and policy directions.

HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

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