



**HelpAge
International**

age helps

Voice of older people in Asia



***When older
people speak***

We listen

Introduction

Older people not only have a voice, but - as this gathering shows - they have a *strong* voice. This should not come as a surprise, since they synthesise a wealth of experience from “lived life” that gives them legitimacy to talk about the concerns of older people in Asia.

The combined age of the 15 participants was well over a thousand years. They have lived through the struggles for independence, World War II, the conflict and partition of South Asia, the war in the Korean Peninsula, the American war in Southeast Asia, the victory of the Communist Party in China in 1949 and the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, the rapid economic growth of the late 20th century. They lived alongside leaders like Gandhi, Sukarno, Mao Tse Tung, and Lee Kwan, amongst others.

They have also witnessed the huge demographic change that has taken (and is taking) place in Asia. In the past, “old age was not a problem, keeping children alive was a problem” said one participant. Now ageing is on top of the social agenda in Asia.

The 15 participants come from different countries in Asia and relate to different spheres of life. They are teachers, farmers, trade unionists, former soldiers, academics, leaders of grassroots organisations, men and women, all of them with the wisdom of age and a clear passion for life.

They were asked to give their views to the HelpAge International Regional Conference on Ageing, in Bali, on three areas: income security, health services, and dignity and respect in old age.

This document presents what they had to say.

Eduardo Klien
Regional Representative
HelpAge International
Asia/Pacific

“There are thousands of older people who cannot express their opinion, so it is important that we, older people, SPEAK here”

Datuk Lum Kin Tuck, Malaysia



Income security in old age



Background

Many older people, especially those in developing countries, do not have access to pensions and most rely on less dependable sources of income. To survive, they often count on their work, and the support of the family and community.

As a result of the ongoing rapid demographic transition - within 25 years one person in five will be over 60 - there is an urgent need to provide adequate economic security for older people in both developed and developing countries.

Economic security in old age not only improves the quality of lives of older people, but also contributes to the well-being of the family members and communities. For example, social pensions play an important role in children's education, healthcare, food security, and household expenditure.

The representatives of older people came up with six practical, realistic and innovative recommendations for governments and civil society.

“Many older people are not entitled to pensions – if governments have an aversion to pensions, then we can develop other strategies to improve older people’s lives from an economic perspective”

Dr Myint Myint Khin, Myanmar

‘[T]here is evidence that older people are in many countries over-represented among the poor, that is, the rates of poverty among older people tend to be higher than those for the population as a whole’ -- Barrientos, A., *New strategies for old age income security in low income countries*, USSA, September 2007

1. Social pensions

Social pensions are considered one of the best ways to provide income security to older people as they are a ‘consistent source of income in old age’. Both the pros and cons of universal coverage and targeted schemes were discussed to support policy development that is tailored to the local context.

Universal coverage is desirable because of its clarity concerning eligibility and its minimal administration requirements. But universal coverage is difficult to implement, especially in developing countries, because of the financial burden placed on the central government. A targeted scheme is more complex in terms of eligibility, and requires more administrative resources to select beneficiaries and to monitor the system. However, many consider a targeted system to be a good way to reach older people in real need.

Sultan Singh, an OPA leader from Rajasthan, India, stated that the current pension of Rs 400 (US\$ 10) is not enough to buy basic foods such as wheat and lentils. To counter the escalating food prices, pensions should be revised at regular intervals.

“Older people can work and produce and contribute to their families. Sometimes all they need is a little support to be able to work”

Mr Sultan Singh, India



2. Subsidised services

Basic services for older people such as transportation, health services, and utilities should either be subsidised or provided free to older people. This will help ease the burden for those with limited income, and provide additional economic relief so that “money saved is money earned”. One may view this provision as an “in-kind pension”.

Low cost housing and home ownership for older people should also be promoted so that the cost of living for older people can be reduced, therefore it will enable them to have more money to spend on the other necessities of life. A specified number of homes in various housing schemes should be reserved especially for older people to encourage more ownership of assets.

3. Grants for income-generating activities

Older people who are physically and mentally active and are interested in pursuing livelihoods should have access to micro-credit, livelihoods grant schemes, and job training.

Grants could be either in cash or in-kind, depending on an individual’s circumstances and resources. Grants can enable older people to initiate or improve small-scale businesses, animal raising and fencing, vegetable cultivation, and handicraft production. In addition to the grants, training in marketing, technical skills and basic accounting further support the likelihood of success of the older person’s endeavour.

In Indonesia older people can receive support with livelihood cash grants from the government to start small-scale income-generating activities if they are above 60 and meet the criteria of “poor” per Indonesian standards. Although this scheme is not yet widely implemented, it helps ensure older people achieve financial independence.

Tips for planning income-generating activities (IGAs) for older people

- Encourage local participation
- Set clear policies and criteria for selecting beneficiaries
- Tailor financial and other support to individuals
- Be realistic in planning the type and scope of the activity

4. Educational programmes to promote care for older people

To strengthen the traditional, informal safety nets for older people, value-based education for the young generation should be introduced. This education promotes responsibility among the youth in caring for older people, including their economic needs.

The school curriculum should include activities where they learn first-hand about older people. For example, an exposure visit to an older people's group would demonstrate their contributions to families and communities. As the economic crisis deepens, most children want to take care of their parents but do not have enough income or resources to support a large family, so incentives such as income tax exemptions or awards can be given to children to take care of older people in their families.

“Once you think you are old, you will restrict yourself. We have to learn something new everyday”

Datuk Lum Kin Tuck, Malaysia



5. Participation in Older People's Associations (OPAs)

Several participants highlighted the role of OPAs in their communities:

Older People's Associations (OPAs) can play a significant role in channelling the demands of older people to the appropriate authorities. With income-generating activities and ventures OPAs can also provide employment opportunities, micro-credit, and grants to their members, thus supporting self-sufficiency for older people and filling those gaps where the government fails to deliver.

OPAs are also a means for older people to form self-help groups to access loans with reasonable interest rates through micro-finance schemes. Older people can then use the credit to invest in livelihood activities.

Additional income will also encourage regular savings to meet unexpected expenses such as healthcare and children's education.

In addition to income-generating activities, grants are often given to the sick and families of deceased. This shows respect to older people and to strengthen relations between the older and younger generations in local communities.

OPAs are therefore important for supporting income in old age.

What are OPAs?

Older people's associations (OPAs) are community-based organisations of older people, aimed at improving living conditions for older people. They provide a mechanism for social support in the community as well as for facilitating activities and delivering services.





6. Older people's insurance and saving schemes

Some poverty reduction programmes have excluded older people, reducing potential impact on old-age poverty and vulnerability. Governments need to allocate more money and resources to establish better schemes for insurance and savings to promote income security in later life, especially in rural areas.

In many countries such options are available in the formal sector, but many older people who might be employed in traditional and/or informal sector are excluded from such schemes. Therefore, both government departments and private companies should work together to offer schemes for those not already covered. This will serve as basic financial protection for disadvantaged older people.



Health in old age



Background

The body gradually degenerates with age. Many diseases affect older people and the loss of mental acuity can impact older people's psychological well-being and lead to depression. There is a need for consistent medical care with good nutrition, exercise and mental stimulation to lessen the impact of ageing and support a healthy life in old age.

The most common health problems with older people are sight impairments, dental problems, hearing impairments, foot problems, weakened immune systems, and mental disorders such as Alzheimer's.

To provide older people with better healthcare, input can be allocated from two sources: government and the community. The focus of the discussion was not on prolonging human life, but ensuring that older people

live actively for the entire length of their life. The participants discussed three categories of older people's health as follows:

- Group 1 - Good health
- Group 2 - Fair health
- Group 3 - Poor health

Each group requires different health strategies. Group 1 will need a preventive healthcare while Group 2 will require both preventive and curative treatments. Intense medical attention should be provided to older people who fall into Group 3.

The discussion then centred on healthy ageing. Healthy ageing will not only enhance quality of life as people age, but also reduce overall inequalities and poverty in the society. Three suggestions were proposed to support healthy ageing.

“Dear God, may I be full of life when I die”

Banyon, quoted by Ms Ann Elizabeth Wee, Singapore

1. Enhance access to healthcare services

Outreach services to provide regular medical care (preventive and curative) to older people are needed. Monitoring older people's health on a regular basis so that any irregularities can be addressed right away is vital. Mobile clinics are also a very useful way to provide outreach services at multiple points, thus bringing healthcare to their door step. The outreach staff should be well-trained in geriatrics and in communicating with older people properly. There should also be mental counseling as many older people face problems with their memory and/or suffer from depression.

In addition, older people should be given priority in hospitals and clinics. For many older people waiting for long periods is a frustrating, tiring and a stressful experience. So, a "no-waiting" policy for older people can be adopted by the health department and implemented in various health centres. There should also be special beds reserved in every hospital for older people or geriatric patients. This will enable easy access to health care for older people.



“Healthcare for older people should consider not only physical but also mental well-being”

Ms Nirmala M.Narula

2. Higher quality of healthcare services

There is a strong need to improve the skills and understanding about geriatrics among health care providers. There is also an urgent need to make health care for older people holistic, which will be inclusive of mental and nutritional needs. A government supported training system on geriatrics for medical professionals must be put in place. There should also be sufficient and appropriate equipment as well as trained staff in all health centers to allow older people to receive quality healthcare services.

‘Older people reported that they had never had a health screening or that it was very infrequent, which indicates a minimal utilization of preventive primary health care services...Older people indicated they only accessed services when they experienced a health problem which affected their ability to carry out their activities, and costs were the main reason cited for not accessing services’ -- Primary Healthcare for Older People: A participatory study in 5 Asian countries, HelpAge APRDC, 2008



Best practices

Both in China and Vietnam, the governments are supporting the development of social insurance systems. Older people are also included in such schemes to access services when they have serious health problems. This is an effective means to ensure the healthcare services are accessible by larger numbers of the country's population.

In Vietnam, some medical universities and institutions are revising their curricula to include compulsory subjects on healthy ageing and geriatrics. In November 2008, the Chinese government set up the Hualing International Training and Exchange Centre on Ageing. The institution aims to provide training to improve policy and services for senior citizens.

“We should be responsible with our diet and check ourselves from making such mistakes as drinking cold water. We should also follow simple home remedies for minor ailments such as tying a cloth around our head when we get headaches”

Mr Sultan Singh, India





3. Community-based activities

Both the community and older people should take certain steps toward active and healthy ageing. For instance:

- There should be greater emphasis placed on training neighbourhood doctors and community-based health workers who work at the community level.
- There should be a government programme to support community-based health workers that specialise in older people's health.
- Older people should also be aware of the practical “do's and don'ts” for their health. Lifestyle changes can promote active and healthy ageing, and lead to a better quality of life.
- Effective home remedies that are familiar to older people and easy to follow should be more widely shared through various media.
- The number of day care centres should be increased for enhanced care.

‘The ageing of populations, mainly due to falling fertility rates and increasing child survival, are an underlying determinant of non-communicable disease epidemics’ -- R. Beaglehole, and D. Yach, “Globalization and the prevention and control of non-communicable disease: the neglected chronic disease of adults,” *The Lancet*, Vol.362, September 13, 2003

Key observations:

- Attention should be given to a healthier lifestyle from the age of 40 so that people can enter their older age with more vitality in their body.
- Health insurance is a major problem in many countries as most insurance companies do not issue insurance policies to older people. The need to advocate government or private companies for easy insurance schemes for older people was underscored.

“Older people mostly suffer from chronic diseases such as cardiovascular problems and joints pain. So, the health care system should be capable of treating these chronic diseases in a sustainable, inexpensive and also accessible manner”

Prof Yuan Hong-Jiang , China

Dignity and respect



Background

Age does not limit the capacity to love; neither does it diminish the expectation to receive dignity and respect. However, with changing socio-economic environments, more older people live a life devoid of love or respect.

Love and respect are often diminished when older people give their property or assets away to their adult children; they are frequently then ignored, forgotten or neglected. This raised some questions: Is love then conditional? Is it dependent on material reward?

The following recommendations may help in enhancing dignity and respect for older people.

“Western families are very small – while Asian families are still big. We have to try and preserve the history of our families before its too late. If we keep the tradition of our family alive, the status of older people will be maintained too”

Ms Nguyen Thi Ngoc Trai, Vietnam

“Older people may not always need help financially, but they certainly need the social and moral support that comes from feeling valued, especially by youth”

Dr Myint Myint Khin, Myanmar

‘The younger generation show more respect for the older people because they are more educated about older people and because they see that the older people are doing something for themselves and the community’ -- Mr. Cheng Xi Xian, 63, president of the Xi Shan Village Older People’s Association, Shaanxi Province, China

1. Self-respect

An older person must first have respect for his/herself before receiving it from others. Self-respect emerges when older people see that they are worthy and capable of contributing to the community. So, older people should always try to stay involved with the community and with changing times. There is a need to maintain and appreciate changes, just as there is a need to maintain and appreciate traditions. Many older people alienate themselves from the family and the community, leading to isolation, negativity and bitterness. This often results in depression and loss of self-esteem. However, by responding to the family or community’s current situation, older people will be able to engage with others and boost their confidence. Older people do not like to be treated as objects of sympathy. They want to be empowered and live a life of dignity.

Tips for older people

- Join social service institutes or associations of older people
- Contribute your skills and knowledge
- Socialise with people from across all generations to groom present and future generations

“If you have parents or grandparents in the house, you have Buddha at home”

Dr Pongsiri Prathanadi, Thailand



2. Role models and family education

Family is one of the best places for learning values. So, every family should inspire young members to respect the older ones. While traditionally, in most Asian countries older people are highly respected, various socio-economic dynamics are negatively affecting this value. Different generations are vying for different kinds of attention, and in this time-constrained environment, older people are becoming more and more sidelined. It is important, therefore, to set an example at home by taking good care of the elderly members, so children learn to adopt this same practice. Families should make a point of including and involving the older members in the family activities and decisions. In this way, families will exemplify the right values, and young members will learn first-hand on how to respect the elderly.

Best practice

In China, older people who turn 70, 80 and 90 years of age are celebrated in the family and the community. This helps in motivating the older person, and also to inspire the community with a role model who has aged well.



3. Awareness raising to promote respect

Communities as a whole should take certain steps to raise awareness about older people, and to encourage people to value the contributions that older people bring to the community. There can be various ways of promoting older people's status in the community, and mass media is one of the best tools to do so. Movies, events, commercials, and public messages about older people should be aired more often. Special days to recognise older people, such as international and national older people's day, should be celebrated widely. Older people who reach milestones, whether for community service or longevity, should be given awards and recognised publicly; a whole range of activities should be planned and implemented to make the older people more visible in the community. Both government and the civil society can play a role in this.

4. Greater participation

Older people are often not included in policy decisions, thus their voices are not heard. Encourage older people to organise and assert themselves to achieve their rights.

- Consult older people and their organisations and consider their suggestions in both development planning and emergencies.
- Consult older people in every HelpAge Network meeting.

**“If you respect older people,
you will have a better and
longer life”**

‘Participation in Older People’s Associations (OPAs) has contributed to increase confidence amongst older people, particularly older women. Where OPAs are already established, they have demonstrated their ability to plan and lead appropriate responses to disasters using the skills acquired. These activities benefit both vulnerable older people and their communities’ -- Older people associations in community disaster risk reduction, HelpAge International, 2007



5. Older People's Associations (OPAs)

As noted above, Older People's Associations (OPAs) and similar groups can be powerful vehicles for change. It has been demonstrated in many countries that OPAs and senior citizens groups are extremely beneficial to raising the profile of older people and achieving gains for their members. In addition to providing income security and concrete welfare to the members as mentioned earlier, OPAs can fight for rights as well. These groups should be replicated in more places as they provide a strong support structure to older people. These groups are also of tremendous value as they serve to motivate and utilise the capacities of older people, and to help them gain respect. Some key observations were highlighted including: (a) older people should start or join an association in their area, (b) media should highlight the contributions of such groups, (c) more advocacy is needed with government and non-government agencies to promote OPA models, and d) older people should transfer knowledge to the younger generation.

**“The OPA is for all older people.
When we get together in an OPA, authorities listen to us”**

Mr Pak Sutrisno, Indonesia



Best practices

Indonesia - The OPAs in Aceh, Indonesia have formed a federation called *Forum Kesuma Bangsa*. The federation offers schemes such as fair-price groceries, livelihood enhancement, and physiotherapy to their 900 members.

India - The OPAs in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan, India have led older people in the region to demand various rights and welfare support for their members from the local government.

Participants of Voice of Older People



Datuk Lum Kin Tuck -- Mr. Lum at 91 years old, was the oldest, and perhaps also the youngest, of the group. Since founding the National Union of Teachers of Malaysia in 1950, he has never stopped fighting for the rights of others. He is the President of NACSCOM and has wide recognition and respect, from the humble and the powerful alike. When Mr. Lum speaks everyone listens.



Dr Pongsiri Prathnadi -- After retiring as surgeon, has been a leading person in the ageing networks and organisations in Thailand. He is a member of the National Committee on Ageing and an active promoter of the rights of older people in Thailand.



Ms Nguyen Thi Ngoc Trai -- Madame Ngoc Trai combines her vocation of researcher and critic of literature in Vietnam with her commitment to the Red Cross and to the Research Centre on Ageing. She is a leader in the Home care programmes in Vietnam, and in a well known advocate for older people.



Mr Cho Ki-Dong -- Mr Cho is one of the leading social workers in the Republic of Korea. He is the founder of HelpAge Korea and main architect of the ASEAN Home care Programme. He is modest and inspirational, a visionary of ageing in Asia, not only in Korea, but in the region.



Ms Myung-Ja Choi -- She has 3 adult children and 6 grand-children. She was born in the North Korea where she still has family. They did not communicate with them for more than 50 years after Korean War in 1950's. She was a nurse and working for hospitals and community health centers. She is active in her retirement life.



Ms Ann Elizabeth Wee -- Ann, 83 years old, looking 50, was born in England and has lived in Singapore for 60 years. She is an academic on social sciences and is still active in the University, and the Juvenile Court. She is also author of several books. Ann has an inquisitive mind, acute sense of fairness and brilliant sense of humour.



Dr Myint Myint Khin -- Dr Khin is a keen mind, a distinguished academic and writer in Myanmar. She is an expert on issues of mental health and older people. Her commitment is exceptional.



Prof. Yuan Hong-Jiang -- Prof. Yuan has had a long involvement in gerontology in China, playing a leading role in research, publications, and teaching. Through Sichuan University, Prof. Yuan has been involved in the promotion of Older People's Associations (OPAs) in Sichuan Province, China.



Prof. Chen Hui Mei -- Prof. Chen, has linked together her profession as surgeon and her involvement in research at the grassroots level of health conditions with Older People's Association (OPA) members in Sichuan Province, China.



Ms Nirmala M. Narula -- Ms Narula is a dedicated social worker in India and currently is President of the Delhi chapter of the Alzheimer's Society of India. She is in constant activity promoting awareness of Alzheimer's and gathering support for the work related to this disease.



Dr A.I Begum -- Dr Begum, from Bangladesh, 78 years old, has a wide experience working with international organisations, government, non-governmental organisations. She has always been active and is now one of the leading experts in Mother and Child health systems.



Mr Sultan Singh -- After being a soldier in the Indian army for over 20 years, Sultan Singh went back to his village in the Thar Desert, where he is now the president of the Older People's Association in Kushlawa village. He is an inspiring leader in his community.



Mr Bala Tampoe -- Mr Bala, General Secretary of the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) for nearly 60 years, is an example of lifetime commitment in the search of equitable societies. The eloquence and passion he demonstrates in his daily activities are inspirational, for old and young in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

Participants of Voice of Older People



Ms Elfi Budio Santoso -- 74 years old, widow. She has been a member of YEL since 1999, and is now the Treasurer. She is also active in the Epilepsy Association and in the Jakarta Communication Forum of older persons.



Mr Pak Sutrisno -- Mr Pak retired as a Captain from the Indonesian Army several years ago and, after the Tsunami of 2004, he became a leader of the Older People's Association (OPA) in Banda Aceh, Indonesia and of the Forum (Association) of OPAs. He is an action-oriented person, involved not only in what the OPA and the community are doing, but also in what they still have to do.

“Age is not a question of time. I speak of different types of age. One is chronological, the second is biological, and the third is psychological. Now, psychologically, I am not old. In many respects, I am the same young lad who was there even 60 years ago and started organizing this union. And since I’m engaged, and active, I keep going. So if you keep in motion, you are alive. You stop moving....you are dead”

Mr Bala Tampoe, General Secretary of Ceylon Mercantile Union, Sri Lanka

Proposal from older people

Income security

- Social pensions
- Subsidised services
- Grants for income-generating activities
- Educational programme to promote care for older people
- Participation in Older People's Associations (OPAs)
- Older people's insurance and saving schemes

Health in old age

- Enhance access to healthcare services
- Higher quality of healthcare services
- Community-based activities

Dignity and respect

- Self-respect
- Role models and family education
- Awareness raising to promote respect
- Greater participation
- Older People's Associations (OPAs)

HelpAge International

PO Box 32832
London N1 9ZN, UK
Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778
Fax +44 (0)20 7713 7993
hai@helpage.org
www.helpage.org

HelpAge International - Asia/Pacific

6 Soi 17, Nimmahemin Road,
Suthep, Muang, Chiang Mai 50200
Thailand
Tel: +66 (0)53 225 440
Fax: +66 (0)53 225 441
Email: hai@helpageasia.org
www.helpage.org