



HelpAge Network

Asia/Pacific Regional Conference 2014

“Older People in Ageing Societies: Burden or Resource?”

Summary of Conclusions

The HelpAge Network held its biennial Asia/Pacific Regional Conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 1-4 September 2014. With the support of UNFPA and the European Union, the conference was attended by 204 participants from 29 countries, representing civil society, government agencies, academia, international bodies, donors and business. The theme was *Older People in Ageing Societies: Burden or Resource?* This conference aimed to stimulate discussion in order to bring greater balance in perceptions of older people and population ageing.

Societies of the Asia/Pacific region are ageing rapidly as a result of expanded life expectancies and reduced fertility. Longer life spans throughout the world are a success of development. Today's people over age 60 have significantly longer life expectancies and are living their later lives in better health compared to previous generations. These trends present both opportunities and challenges, calling for a radical review of our view of ageing and later life and of the policies needed in response.

Nevertheless, international development continues to overlook population ageing. Indeed, the Millennium Development Goals failed to address the impact of population dynamics on any age group, and ageing still has a low priority in the post-2015 agenda. This partly reflects a predominantly negative view of later life in many societies, a perspective emphasising the burden of ageing and how to limit the damage that it is believed to cause.

While acknowledging the challenges of ageing, the conference agreed that we must also change the way we view old age if societies are to continue to flourish in an ageing world. We can no longer treat old age only as a time of decline and loss. Economies and societies will need to make far-reaching changes in the ways they are organised to address population ageing and nurture the contributions that older people have to offer. As Eduardo Klien, HelpAge International East Asia/Pacific Regional Director, said in framing the conference, the challenge now is how do we redesign ageing societies considering the scope and rapidness of ageing in the region?

The conference examined the theme through three main perspectives: health, the economy and social perceptions.

Health: Investment in healthy ageing is a precondition to maximise the contributions of older people to their societies. If older people are healthy and able to function as independently as possible, they can continue to work, delay retirement, contribute to the household and play an active role in community affairs. If illness and disability arrive prematurely because of unhealthy practices throughout the lifecourse, the costs of health care for those in later life will strain national finances. The non communicable diseases of later life are growing and often can be controlled effectively, yet there is a disparity between resource allocations in the health sector and the changing disease burden. There is a need to narrow the gap between life expectancy (LE) and healthy life expectancy (HALE) through preventive health activities and primary health care. As explained by the keynote speaker Hon. Prof. Keizo Takemi, MP, Japan's 1960s investment in achieving universal health care improved equity in the health system, expanded coverage, and controlled health care costs. It also contributed to a healthier workforce and economic productivity. Now, with ageing societies, a shift is needed towards prevention, promotion, self-care and management of chronic illness, treatment and long-term care for those who need it.

Economy: Longevity and a decline in the ratio of 18-59 year olds to those over 60 require adaptations and new approaches to work in old age, in both the formal and informal sectors. Asia faces the double challenge of maintaining economic growth while simultaneously ensuring income security in old age. The extension of working years as people live longer is only natural. This may imply expanded opportunities for flexible retirement in the formal sector, or promoting enabling steps for those who wish to continue working into old age in the informal sector. Despite common objections, evidence shows that continuing to work longer does not lower the employment of younger people, as Philip O'Keefe of the World Bank noted. Income support in old age also needs some rethinking in light of population ageing. Formal pension systems need to be redesigned so as not to be a burden or discourage work. For those without employment pensions, work and social protection are a mutually virtuous cycle. Social pensions are generally not large enough to discourage work and they are an investment in active engagement, for example by improving the older person's nutrition and basic health care. In addition to removing barriers to paid employment for older people, society should also recognise that older people extensively contribute unpaid work to the household economy and their communities.

Perceptions: Most older people are healthy, vibrant, and active. The very conception of old age needs to change or a huge potential will be wasted. Rethinking ageing societies implies more than just policy change. It also requires a change in social behaviours and practices. Myths about ageing are manufactured, as explained by Mr. Nalaka Gunawardene of TVE Asia, but we can work with media to promote more balanced perceptions and establish the evidence that older people are really a resource. The conference agreed that 'resource or burden', while provoking us to think about the issue from two sides, is a false dichotomy. Older people may be a resource or vulnerable at various points of their lives, and policies and practices must reflect that reality. In addition, a rights based approach will lead us to respect the worth and dignity of all persons, rather than measuring their value only on their practical contributions to society.