

Ageing Societies – Implications for Uganda

Dr David Okello outlines the issues in ageing populations and emphasises the need for public education and awareness on ageing as a natural process



This article reflects on the need to promote behaviour for better ageing, in order to address possible challenges that could affect the future of senior citizens. It highlights the key issues in ageing societies and the implications for Uganda.

An older person is defined by the United Nations as a person who is over 60 years of age.¹ But most developed countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of ‘elderly’ or older person. This definition is, however, arbitrary, as it is mostly associated with the age at which one can begin to receive retirement (pension) benefits.

In Africa, families and communities often use other socio-cultural reference to define age, including family status (grandparents), physical appearance, or age-related health conditions. Actual birth dates are often unknown because many individuals in Africa do not have an official record of their birth date. Chronological definitions of ageing may also differ widely from traditional definitions of when a person is older. Uganda has adopted the UN definition of older persons as those aged 60 years and above. Yet, there is no general agreement on the age at which a person becomes old. The common use of a calendar age to mark the threshold of old age assumes equivalence with biological age, yet it is generally accepted that these two are not necessarily synonymous.

Biological changes in ageing

Ageing is a natural process. In the broader sense, it reflects all the changes that take place over the course

of life. These changes start from birth and progress throughout the life course. Middle age is the time when people notice the age-related changes like greying of hair, wrinkled skin and some physical decline.

In biological terms, waning body immunity combines with other effects of ageing to make older people more vulnerable to both communicable and non-communicable diseases. Anticipated health problems of the older persons include impaired vision, impaired hearing, chronic pain, high blood pressure, mental illness (cognitive impairment and depression) and muscular-skeletal degenerative illnesses. Older persons also frequently suffer the brunt of other epidemics and disease outbreaks, including the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Global trends

Population ageing constitutes one of the most significant demographic transformations of the 21st century. For the first time in history, humankind will reach a point at which there are fewer children than older persons in the world. This is attributable to a general decline in birth rates. There has also been a significant decline in death rates for children and a reduction in adult mortality.

All regions of the world will be confronted by growing numbers of older persons. The fastest increase will take place in Africa which is projected to reach 215 million people aged 60 or older by 2050.²

For Western Asia, the population aged 60 or older is projected to more than quadruple in the next 40 years, reaching 69 million in 2050. The proportion of persons aged 60 and over is projected to increase to 19 per cent by 2050. The Asia-Pacific region was home to 59 per cent of the world’s elderly population in 2010.

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It is estimated that the number of older persons in this region will triple in the next 40 years, from 414 million in 2010 to 1.25 billion by 2050.

Similar trends are found in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the proportion of persons aged 60 and over will more than double between 2010 and 2050, from 10 per cent to 25 per cent, reaching 188 million persons.

Europe had the oldest population of all regions in 2010 and is expected to reach 236 million by 2050. Europe will continue to have the oldest population in the world, with a proportion of older persons that is projected to increase to 34% in 2050.

Japan now has the oldest population in the world. Their population pyramid is wider in older ages and narrow at base. By contrast, Uganda population pyramid is wide at the base and very narrow towards the older age groups.

Why pay attention to ageing populations?

The UN categorises older persons as a group of people with special rights. Together with women, children, migrant workers, refugees, the poor and other specified clusters in the UN Charter, they are considered as Special Groups with rights that national governments are obliged to enforce. They also face a number of challenges that require specific strategies to deal with. The challenges facing older persons across the world are similar and include:

1. Discrimination on the basis of age is often combined with other forms of discrimination, on the grounds of gender, race and ethnicity, religion, disability, health or socio-economic conditions, which negatively affect the enjoyment of the full range of human rights of older persons.
2. Poverty: The single most pressing challenge to the welfare of older persons is poverty, characterised by: homelessness, malnutrition, unattended chronic diseases, lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation, unaffordable medicines and treatments, and income insecurity.
3. Violence and abuse of older persons, usually by someone in a position of trust, occurs worldwide.
4. Lack of specific measures and services. There are not enough resources and facilities to cope with the growing demand, particularly for specialised services such as geriatric services.

Population trends in Uganda

The population in Uganda is largely characterised by young people. More than 75% of the population is below the age of 30. HIV dropped life expectancy to 43 years during the 1990s, but it picked after an aggressive HIV response and immunisation campaigns for preventable diseases. The increase in older population currently witnessed is attributable to the higher rate of survival and reduction in adult mortality. Life expectancy in 2020 was estimated at 64 years.

The number of older persons aged 60 years and above almost doubled between 1991 and 2002 (from 686,000 to 1.1 million persons) and increased to 1.6 million in 2014. Older persons currently constitute

about 4% of the total population.

Based on these trends and experience elsewhere, the country should vigorously begin to plan and put in place mechanisms to address the plight of older persons.

Care and support for older persons

The increase in ageing population is against the backdrop of deterioration of social and family support systems that sustain the health and wellbeing of older persons. For instance, rural-urban migration has drastically affected the care and support rendered to older persons. The existing social problem such as unemployment also limits the capacity to support rural older persons.

A majority of older persons living in the rural areas are generally neglected and not provided with adequate social services, including health care. In many communities older persons are increasingly left to fend for themselves. They are obliged to take up the responsibility of caring for grandchildren. Healthcare and other social services do not have dedicated programmes for older persons.

Government support

The Government of Uganda provides a stipend for senior citizens, who now receive a monthly cash transfer of UGX 25,000 for those aged 80 years and above. However, the support provided is too little and targets a very small fraction of older persons. Ideally this support should be expanded to cover a wider age group; and the amounts given out should also be revised to reflect the prevailing cost of living.

Nevertheless, older persons in Uganda are increasingly gaining national recognition. The National Policy for Older Persons (2009) provides for the establishment of a National Council for Older Persons to coordinate various stakeholders involved in the implementation of programmes for older persons. This is being formalised by having older person's special representation in Parliament.

Some of the issues that require urgent considerations include:

1. Social support system;
2. Health insurance for people over 60 years;
3. Isolation due to reduction of friends and social circles;
4. Reduced independence;
5. Coping with family relationships ;
6. Attitude towards ageing; and
7. Pressure to share properties.

Public education and awareness of ageing as a natural process and promoting behavior for better ageing is critical. There is also need for public policies and legislation that address the needs of older persons. This is where philanthropic such as Rotary and others could play a role, to champion the old and to fight ageism.

References

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2. Summary of the Report of the UN Secretary-General to the General Assembly resolution 65/182 of December 2010.