

Social protection for older people: A plan of action

In 2002 the UN World Assembly on Ageing adopted a Plan of Action aimed at guaranteeing senior citizens a decent livelihood. At the time, the governments of 159 countries agreed on policy objectives but failed to make binding commitments. Even so, countries such as Bolivia, Tanzania and Bangladesh have made great progress on this issue. There is still a long way to go and the next step seems to be a UN convention on senior citizens.

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The revolution of long life is now upon us. In most countries of the world, until very recently, half of all human beings died before the age of 20. Only a handful lived to see the birth of their grandchildren. But today, more and more people are living very long lives.

According to United Nations (UN) projections, persons aged 60 years or older will number almost two billion by 2050. Older people will exceed the population of children, marking an unprecedented event in human history. Developing countries will experience the most rapid growth of the world's older population.²

The ageing of populations is a human milestone that reflects better public health and nutrition, but the shift brings new policy issues to the fore. Particularly, there is the question of how older persons sustain themselves as they live past the period of active work. The UN estimates that today 140 million older persons, particularly older women, are living on the equivalent of less than USD 2 per day.³

Older people are among the poorest of the poor for several reasons. Traditional family support is declining in virtually every country. Having worked for subsistence or very low wages, few elderly people have savings or other resources of their own for old age. Nor do they have access to job-based social protection benefits. Also, they may suffer from disabilities such as sight or hearing loss that restrict their ability to work. Elderly widows may face particular disfavour and discrimination in their communities.

Paradoxically, older women often have important care-giving responsibilities. They may be raising grandchildren or taking care of sick, middle-aged

children in communities hit by the crisis of HIV/AIDS. Or they may be supporting grandchildren whose parents have left for jobs in distant places. As sole breadwinners, these grandparents may find themselves unable to provide adequate nutrition, access to health care or education for their children, grandchildren or themselves.

One grandmother in a village in Africa described her situation this way:

When we don't have food, I put a pot with water on the fire. When my grandson asks for dinner, I say it's cooking, hoping that he will fall asleep fast enough so he doesn't find out.

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing

In April 2002, the UN World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid took up the question of how older people can be assured a decent livelihood. Governments of 159 countries adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), a policy document that offered many suggestions including income security, social protection and poverty prevention.⁴

In the MIPAA negotiations, governments supported policy 'objectives,' but they refused to accept binding commitments. As a result, the agreement has little legal force, even though it sets norms and offers important original policy ideas.

The MIPAA spoke about social protection and gender issues. The Plan addressed informal sector work and called for 'innovative' programmes of income support. It urged a minimum income for all older persons, in the form of non-contributory, government-funded pensions.

The concept of a 'social pension' was one of the most innovative and influential parts of the Madrid Plan. Since the adoption of the Plan in 2002, an increasing number of countries have set up social pensions.

Activists and NGOs involved in the worldwide campaign Grow Up Free From Poverty⁵ seized on social pensions as a new policy tool. Advocates focused on social pensions for several reasons:

- A minimum income can lift older persons out of poverty and increase their access to social services, such as health care.

- Older persons, who often live with their families, share their income with the household. Social pensions raise the overall family standard of living, and improve nutrition and access to education for children.
- Social pensions support older persons who act as care-givers of orphans in the AIDS crisis.
- Social pensions help break the intergenerational poverty cycle.

In addition, social pensions are comparatively affordable for governments to implement. Along with the 72 high- and middle-income countries that have implemented social pensions, there are also several poor countries, such as Bangladesh, Bolivia, Lesotho and Nepal. In 2006, 13 African nations met in Zambia to draw up and adopt the Livingston Agreement to institute social pensions.⁶

Studies by NGOs and UN agencies illustrate the affordability of these programmes. HelpAge International surveyed 18 low- and middle-income countries on the cost of social pensions. The study found that nearly 70% of those surveyed could deliver a social pension for less than 1% of gross domestic product (GDP). The International Labour Organization (ILO) also concluded that poor countries can afford basic social protection packages, especially if rich countries provide transitional financing assistance and if the implementing country makes a strong national policy commitment. Even the World Bank is a convert. After years of avidly opposing public pensions in favour of private, contributory schemes, the Bank has recently started to promote social pensions.⁷

Thanks to this increasing policy consensus, rich countries have begun to give development assistance for social protection, including social pensions. Among the funders are the Nordic countries, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Belgium. UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, has also provided funding, in recognition of the potential of social pensions to help families and children.

Despite this growing support, the MIPAA agreement itself lacks firm legal commitments and campaigners cannot demand social pensions as an

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2 "Population Ageing, 2006" (poster). United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, p. 1.

3 Kugel, A. (2006). "Report on the UN International Forum on the Eradication of Poverty". November, p. 1. Available from: <www.globalaging.org/elderrights/world/2006/povertyforumreport/pdf>.

4 "Report of the Second World Assembly on Ageing," Madrid, 8-12 April, 2002, A/CONF.197/9 (23 May 2002).

5 <www.grow-up-free-from-poverty.org>

6 HelpAge International News (2006). "African Governments Take Action on Social Protection". Zambia, 28 March. See: <www.globalaging.org/pension/world/2006/helpagepensionsafrica.htm>.

7 See the specific reports about World Bank policies on social security developed by Antonio Tricarico and BGRF in this Report.

acquired 'right.' This voluntarist approach at Madrid was a backlash from the UN World Conferences of the 1990s – including the conferences on the environment, human rights, population, social development, and women. NGOs had demanded (and sometimes won) timetables and specific goals. These egalitarian programmes proved difficult for governments to fund and implement because of pressures for tax reduction from companies and wealthy citizens. This led to many conflicts and embarrassments, which governments wanted to avoid in future. Consequently, rich and poor countries alike resisted further binding commitments, especially in the ageing sector, perceived as being potentially very costly. Governments clearly did not want NGOs or citizens to 'name and shame' them for failing to implement the MIPAA.

During the Madrid negotiations, some delegations tried to water down every article to its least binding form of language. Washington, with the Bush administration in office, insisted vocally on a non-binding route. Governments firmly resisted NGO demands for stronger language and most delegations strongly opposed references to extra financing. In the end, governments decided that the Commission for Social Development, with UN Secretariat assistance, would review the Plan's implementation after five years.

The UN Secretariat staff later devised a 'bottom-up approach' to the review. Crafted to avoid 'name and shame' confrontations, the bottom-up approach sidesteps government responsibility and puts most of the follow-through burden on older persons themselves and on their presumed grassroots organizations from the 'bottom of society'. These people and organizations are expected to find other partners, create services, organize advocacy organizations, set up programmes, pressure the governments and articulate the needs of older persons. At its best, older persons and their allies would suggest ageing policies and governments would respond positively. The plan shifts most responsibility from the state to 'civil society'. Considering the meagre resources available in most affected communities and the general absence of such local organizations, this approach tends to slow action. And by failing to establish a mandatory international reporting and review system, it contributes to ignorance of the agreement within governments, NGOs and even the UN itself.

Some countries have nonetheless made progress, most notably poor countries. In 2002, Bolivia decided to develop better data about age and gender to make its social pension programme work more fairly. In 2003, Uganda committed to develop a social pensions system and ruled that all government departments must pay attention to nutrition and health for the elderly. Tanzania set a goal to extend social pensions to 40% of its older citizens. NGO campaigns helped promote this progress. In 2005, a Bangladesh older persons' monitoring group took

the government to task for not paying the Old Age Allowance to all eligible older persons; as a result the government extended payments to 300,000 more elderly.⁸

During the post-Madrid period, the UN's Regional Economic and Social Commissions encouraged governments to adopt national ageing programmes and to improve data, resources, and reporting. The commissions in Asia, Latin America and Europe were especially active.

The UN Programme on Ageing in New York sought special funding from the UN system and co-operated with other UN agencies to offer training for government officials in a number of low- and middle-income countries. UN staff also gave on-site support to governments developing national ageing plans. In February 2008, the Commission on Social Development will review how governments have implemented the MIPAA, providing another opportunity for forward motion.

The way ahead

The five-year experiment with the MIPAA has spotlighted useful programme initiatives and alerted some countries to the potential among their older population. However, much remains to be done.

Even though the UN review process is weak, the global crisis of poverty has forced a policy shift toward social protection, both among governments and among intergovernmental institutions. Most recently, in May 2007, the G8 labour ministers promised to address the "need to develop social protection" and "international labour standards."⁹ Governments of many rich countries now see social protection positively, opening a new policy space for social pensions and other kinds of social protection for older people.

In this context, the UN may be able to develop policies for universal social protection for older persons. Governments might even be willing to mandate this in a new binding agreement. A UN Convention for Older Persons could accomplish this goal. People of all ages would understand that protecting their grandparents and parents would also mean protecting themselves in their own later life. A healthy, long life, with access to subsistence and health care, should be available to all. Using the Madrid Plan's recommendations on social protection as a model, a Convention could make great strides in this direction.

8 UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (2006). "Guidelines for Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, Bottom-up Participatory Approach". New York, p. 36-49.

9 "Shaping the Social Dimension of Globalization," May 2007, p. 1, 4. See: <www.globalaging.org/elderrights/world/index.htm#articles4>.