

CIVIL SOCIETY IN AN AGEING WORLD

–TOBY PORTER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE,
HELPAge INTERNATIONAL

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

The world's population is ageing. By 2050 one in five people will be aged 60 or over.¹ Due to longer life expectancy and a decline in fertility, older people already outnumber children under five; by 2050, they will outnumber those under 15.² Much of this growth is taking place in developing countries, where seven out of 10 of the world's over-60s live today,³ but where the structures and policies do not exist to support a life of dignity and inclusion in older age.

Living longer is a triumph of development. It is changing the way we view our lives, and the possibilities of what we will be able to achieve in life are expanding. For some of us, the accumulation of wealth over time, contribution to pension schemes and ever-improving healthcare mean we are healthier and wealthier than ever in our older age.

However, we live in an increasingly unequal world and, as we live longer, inequalities deepen. For millions of people the impact of years of poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, poor nutrition and limited education accumulate with devastating impact in older age. In low and middle-income countries just one in four people above pensionable age receives a pension, so retirement is a luxury for the very few.⁴ Health inequality is reflected in large variations in life expectancy: people aged 60 in Japan can expect to live over 20 more healthy years, whereas in Afghanistan this falls to just over nine years.⁵ Sixty per cent of people aged over 60 in low and middle-income countries report being unable to access health services because they cannot afford the visit.⁶

AGE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

HelpAge is a unique global network of organisations helping to shape the future for older people. We support older people to claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure and healthy lives. Our engine is a global network made up of over 100 organisations, working nationally

1 'World population prospects: the 2015 revision', United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division, DVD Edition, 2015.

2 Ibid.

3 'World Population Ageing', UNDESA Population Division, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Tcwt1a>.

4 'Social protection for older persons: Key policy trends and statistics', International Labour Organization (ILO), Social Protection Department, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1qRoZ2h>.

5 'Global AgeWatch Index: Insight report 2015', HelpAge International, 2015, page 8.

6 'World Report on Ageing and Health', World Health Organization (WHO), 2015.

and internationally, in more than 70 countries. Our members are diverse organisations all over the world, ranging from large national bodies to small local and grassroots organisations, all working to benefit older people on a huge range of issues, including healthcare, emergency response, social enterprise and income security. This diversity is a driving force for our network and organisation, and gives us extraordinary access to thinkers and changers, global leaders and local activists.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have always been at the forefront of the fight for equality and inclusion. Whether focused on gender equality, disability or ethnic minorities, civil society activists have stood up for the rights of people neglected or discriminated against by society and governments and tirelessly promoted the rights and inclusion of the most marginalised.

However, there is still a long way to go with regard to ageing and older people. We need the support of civil society to acknowledge and embrace the fact that we live in a world with a rapidly growing older population, and to tackle ageism, arguably the last unrecognised widespread, identity-based form of discrimination.

AN AGEIST WORLD

The term ageism was first conceived in 1969 to describe discrimination against older people. It is the most commonly experienced form of prejudice, according to research across 28 European countries.⁷

Despite common narratives around respect for our elders, older people tell us that they are stereotyped as confused, of unsound mind and unable to make their own decisions. They often tell us that they are considered a burden on society, families, the healthcare system, the economy and the welfare system. They may be seen as incapable and useless, and unable to work efficiently, profitably or productively. An older man from Uganda summed this up: “I am considered a spent force with nothing left to contribute to society, that I have had my turn and should give way to the youth.”⁸

Age can signify dependence on others, which not only perpetuates and heightens inequality, but dehumanises and holds us all back. Kamrul, aged 78 from Bangladesh, said, “My problem is that since I was about 60 I’ve at times found it impossible to eat, and at other times I don’t eat. Sometimes my sons give me a lot, sometimes they don’t.”⁹

Ageist attitudes are a substantial challenge for society and individuals. Exclusion can be exacerbated in older age, when older women and men, who may already have seen poverty, poor health and marginalisation, can face stereotyping, prejudice and direct or indirect discrimination, simply on account of being older.

⁷ ‘Ageism in Europe: Findings from the European Social Survey’, D Abrams, P S Russell, M Vauclair and H Swift H, Age UK, 2011.

⁸ Quotations are from ‘In Our Own Words: What older people say about discrimination and human rights in older age’, Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People, March 2015, <http://bit.ly/1MvQCLG>.

⁹ ‘We can make change: piloting participatory research with persons with disabilities and older people in Bangladesh’, Voices of the marginalised Consortium, November 2014, page 37.

INCLUDING OLDER PEOPLE IN DEVELOPMENT

Age discrimination and the rationing of services on the basis of age is alive and well in most societies, as well as within development and humanitarian programmes.

CSOs working on the broad themes of development, poverty reduction, health or education could be more responsive to the impact of population ageing on their work and proactively include older people in their interventions and programmes.

International development focuses around particular population groups such as children, youth, women, people with disabilities or indigenous people. This is reflected in the way civil society organises itself and in how donors allocate their funding. No doubt the two are intricately linked. Most development donors do not list older people among the groups they support, and the result is that CSOs struggle to find funding for this area, perpetuating inequality.

Age discrimination and the rationing of services on the basis of age is alive and well in most societies.

Why is this? Development models that focus on economic growth, productivity and cost-effective interventions for which value for money can be demonstrated are not necessarily inclusive or innovative. They are certainly not rights-based. Limiting people to a single identity fails to recognise a person as a complex human being, and is a barrier to taking a life course approach to development.

Regardless of our identity, whether as a child, a woman, a gay person, an indigenous person, someone with disabilities, or a combination of these, we all aspire to live longer and healthier lives. Nearly a quarter of the world's women are aged 50 or over,¹⁰ and yet many organisations working on women's issues are only just beginning to address the issues affecting women across their entire life course. Most responses to violence against women and girls, for example, pay little or no attention to the different forms of exclusion and violence that women experience in their older age. Those working on disability are only just beginning to look at disability in older age, despite the fact that prevalence rates increase dramatically with age.¹¹ In the ageist world in which we live, after a certain age, we lose the identity we have of being a woman or a person with disabilities and are identified solely as an older person whose value and worth is diminished.

Human rights organisations rarely focus on human rights in older age. We see it in humanitarian responses too. Of those who died during Hurricane Katrina in the USA in 2005, 75 per cent were aged over 60.¹² And 56 per cent of those who died in Japan during the tsunami in 2011 were over the age of 65.¹³ Yet less than one per cent of the projects funded under the UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and flash appeals in 2010 to 2011 included activities targeting older people.¹⁴ Inclusive humanitarian assistance might cost more, but it is a right.

10 'World population prospects: the 2015 revision', UNDESA Population Division, op. cit.

11 'World Disability Report', WHO, 2011, pages 25, 28 and 30.

12 'Hurricane Katrina: Unequal opportunity disaster', N Wilson, Public Policy and Ageing Report, vol. 16, no. 2, 2006, pages 8-13.

13 National Policy Agency, Japan, 2012.

14 'Humanitarian financing for older people and persons with disabilities', HelpAge International and Handicap International, 2012,

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

We are now starting to see recognition and positive change. The engagement of civil society in the negotiation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlighted the importance of leaving no one behind, regardless of, for example, age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, location and social and economic status.

Age is now included in the 17 SDGs and their targets. Whilst these high level commitments have not yet had time to translate into meaningful change on the ground, we are already seeing positive signs that change is coming and older people will have greater inclusion in organised civil society.

The existence of ageism is becoming more widely acknowledged. The World Health Organization's (WHO) 2015 *World Report on Ageing and Health* recognised that ageism is widespread and can be a major barrier to developing good policy and practice.¹⁵ Civil society, including organisations of older people, contributed to this report. An International Labour Organization (ILO) report on the extension of social security to long-term care also recognised that ageism is a global phenomenon that can be embedded in regulations and legislation, and even text books on health and long-term care.¹⁶

More attention is being paid to ageism and age discrimination in the field of human rights at the regional level, with the prohibition of age discrimination central to the Council of Europe's 2014 recommendation on the rights of older people, the Inter-American convention on the rights of older people, adopted in 2015, and a new protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.¹⁷

Issues of data on older people have long been hidden by gaps and weaknesses in national, regional and global statistical systems. It has now become more widely acknowledged that there is a lack of data on age because of upper age caps on data collection. As the implementation process for the SDGs begins to take hold, improvements must take place to ensure that data is collected across the life course.

OLDER CITIZENS MONITORING

How can we ensure legislation and policy commitments towards older people are upheld? One growing way is the involvement of older citizens in monitoring, by using participatory research to monitor the implementation of policies and services. Evidence gathered by older citizen monitors is used in advocacy at local, national and international levels. The process not only raises awareness of rights and entitlements, thus empowering older people, but also creates social interaction that helps overcome isolation and loneliness.

¹⁵ WHO, 2015, op. cit.

¹⁶ 'Extension of Social Security: Long-term care protection for older persons: A review of coverage deficits in 46 countries', ILO, ESS Working Paper No. 50, 2015, page 1.

¹⁷ 'Recommendation on The Promotion of the Human Rights of Older Persons CM/Rec(2104)2', Council of Europe, 2014, paragraphs II.6–II.8; 'Inter-American Convention on protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons', Organization of American States, June 2015, Article 5; 'Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa', African Union, 2016.

As a result of this work, a geriatric desk was established in the Kenyan Ministry of Health and Welfare. In the Philippines, after 2013's Typhoon Haiyan, which affected older people disproportionately, older citizens monitoring groups have become a fundamental part of emergency relief and rehabilitation programmes.

A lack of age disaggregated data can also mean that access to health services for older people is not monitored. In Tanzania a health service older people's forum working on a two year project saw the number of health facilities providing age disaggregated data increase from one per cent to over 60 per cent.

CHANGE THROUGH ACTIVISM AND INCLUSION

Older activists are also challenging ageist attitudes at the individual and community levels.

Older activists are also challenging ageist attitudes at the individual and community levels. Launched in 2007, Age Demands Action is a grassroots movement that involves older men and women in over 60 countries calling for their governments to end age discrimination. Mobilising on average 140,000 people annually, Age Demands Action has resulted in concrete improvements to older people's lives, ranging from discounted fares on train and bus routes in Pakistan, to a new senior citizens' allowance for people over 80 in Sri Lanka and an increased cash transfer with expanded coverage benefiting older Kenyans.

Last summer, I was delighted to accompany Esther Wamera, an Age Demands Action activist from Kenya, to a high-level panel event at the United Nations (UN). Also on the panel was Amina J Mohammed, the then Special Advisor of the UN Secretary-General on Post-2015 Development Planning. Esther, a retired banker and passionate activist who regularly leads delegations of older people to various ministries to campaign for older people's rights, is a great example of how older people can and should be ambassadors for their own rights.

HelpAge worked hard to have ageing issues included within the new global goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But we recognise that we need to go further: civil society needs to collaborate and work together on inclusion. The growing interest in citizen action and participation is extremely positive. Last year's Action/2015 campaign was a great example of CSOs across the globe coming together. Different groups stood together on a shared platform and the campaign broke civil society barriers. But, in order to truly 'leave no one behind', civil society and our organisations and representatives need to reject issue-based isolation and embrace inclusion.

AGEISM AT WORK

A final area to consider is whether organised civil society is ageist in our own employment practices. Legal protection against age discrimination in employment is common across different jurisdictions. But to what extent do we in civil society encourage age diversity at work? How many of us monitor the age profile of our workforce and take proactive steps to recruit under-

represented age groups? Do we support employees as they age in the workplace, through mid-life career transitions or by creating flexible, individualised retirement plans? Do we have upper age limits for our volunteers or mandatory retirement policies that force people to stop working against their will? In 2012, the UN itself was accused of ageism when a woman who applied for a communications job at the age of 66 was told that the age cap for applications was 57. This was because the UN had a retirement age of 62 and employees had to work a minimum of five years to qualify for a UN pension.¹⁸

There needs to be more research in this area. According to data from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, a membership body for CSOs in England, the voluntary sector in the UK is an important employer of older people, with 38 per cent of employees aged 50 or over, compared to 34 per cent in the public sector and 28 per cent in the private sector.¹⁹ What this does not tell us, however, is how many people continue working beyond the age of 64, often considered as the arbitrary end of our so-called 'working age'.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil society has a key role to play in confronting and eliminating negative ageist attitudes and behaviour. Campaigns to end ageism, such as Age UK's Just Equal Treatment campaign,²⁰ need to be taken to a worldwide level, and HelpAge is planning just such a global action in the near future.

Policy makers need to respond to population ageing. A priority has to be age-inclusive development and humanitarian planning, policies and programmes supporting older people's health and economic, social and political empowerment.

Ending ageism requires all of us to challenge our own attitudes to ageing, and be vigilant with our own organisations, our governments and the wider community to ensure that there are positive and enabling environments to support later life. Older people must be reflected in data, their voices heard, their choices listened to, and their role as contributing citizens recognised and supported.

18 'Woman, 66, claims UN policy is ageist', The Canberra Times, 18 February 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Wscwap>.

19 'UK Civil Society Almanac 2015 / Workforce', National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 29 May 2015, <http://bit.ly/1YnAiCf>.

20 'Age discrimination: Just equal treatment', Age UK, <http://bit.ly/1TRqYFr>.