

Country report: Ageing in Nigeria – Current State, Social and Economic Implications

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The Geo-Political Situation of Nigeria

Nigeria with a population of 140million (NPC 2006) is the most populated nation in Africa and the ninth in the world. (UN2005). Life expectancy at birth stands at 51.6 years. The population growth rate (2000-2005) is 2.5% with 5% of the total population aged 60 and above. Nigeria is a Federal Republic consisting of 36 states, further divided into about 745 districts. The federal states possess some degree of autonomy. The Federal Government controls power and the economy by directing affairs of the whole nation.

Nigeria is culturally heterogeneous with over 350 ethnic-linguistic groups, with the predominant ones being the Hausa of the North, Yoruba of the South West and the Igbo of the South East. All share a similar cultural background and, thus, perception of care for older persons.

Ageing as a Policy Issue

Ageing has become a global phenomenon and indeed a critical policy issue receiving some recognition by governments of developing countries like Nigeria where it is reflected in the government's vital document of economic and social development strategy. Globally, the greatest increase in the number of older people is occurring in the developing and middle income countries, which are now experiencing rapid shifts from high mortality and high fertility to much reduced fertility and greater longevity. Nigeria is not an exception. While population ageing in developed countries evolved gradually as a result of an earlier decline in fertility and improving living standards for the majority of the population over a relatively long period of time after the industrial revolution, population ageing in developing nations is occurring more rapidly because of rapid fertility decline and an increasing life expectancy.

Nigeria, like other African countries, sees this emerging issue as a serious future challenge. The inability of government to cope with the regular payment of pensions to the retired workforce, the inadequate social services and health facilities to cater for the needs of an ageing population, as well as a predominantly rural agrarian population all pose new threats to food security, social security and national security of Nigeria. Older people's lives are characterized by growing inadequacies in customary family supports, social exclusion and non-existent social security targeted at them, thus being very vulnerable to poverty and diseases.

A growth in the numbers of older people inevitably has brought an increase in the range and intensity of their problems and needs. Older Persons in Nigeria suffer a lot of hardship in an increasingly hostile, competitive and intolerant society. Older people constitute the poorest group in Nigerian society. The implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the Nigerian government has little or no consideration for them. Halving the rate of poverty and hunger by 2015 without seriously considering older people will affect the success rate of the otherwise well-conceived programme.

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and currently has the highest older persons population in Africa (Kinsella and Velkoff 2001). With the largest population in Africa and the ninth in the world, it is estimated that by the year 2025 (see table 1) the population of Nigerians aged 60 and above will constitute 6 percent of the entire population.

Table 1 Projected Population Ageing in Africa. West African and Nigeria (UN2005)

From 2005-2050

| | Population 60+ (per cent) | | | Population 60+ (millions) | | |
|-------------|---------------------------|------|------|---------------------------|------|-------|
| | 2005 | 2025 | 2050 | 2005 | 2025 | 2050 |
| Africa | 5.2 | 6.4 | 10.0 | 47.4 | 85.8 | 192.9 |
| West Africa | 4.7 | 5.5 | 9.0 | 12.0 | 21.8 | 51.6 |
| Nigeria | 4.9 | 6.0 | 9.9 | 6.4 | 11.5 | 25.5 |

Source: UN Population Division (2005)

There is the potential for a rapid growth rate of the older population in coming years, with a lower growth rate among the younger population. The implication is a major change in the age structure of Nigerian society. Based on the findings of the National Census conducted in 2006 the National Population Commission confirmed an increase in the percentage and the number of those aged 60 years and above. In the coming years, the ageing population is expected to increase in numbers and life expectancy rates will gradually increase with significant social and economic implications to the individuals and the Nigerian government. For example, the old-age dependency ratio is not high at present (at least compared with the developed nations) – but it will increase in the coming years. This serves as pointer to problems to come.

Changes in Family Structure in Nigeria

The family in Nigeria used to consist of members of the extended lineage: parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, nieces, etc. – a large family indeed. Before “modernization” came to “destroy” the concept of the extended family system and replace it with the nuclear family, the extended family as a social structural phenomenon served more or less as a form of social insurance (traditional safety net) for old age.

There is an observable progressive shift in function away from the traditional family. Traditional functions of the family like care and social support to older family members have gradually decreased in the recent past due to economic problems, migration and influence by foreign culture. Family members however are unable to effectively cope with the challenges of daily living. Emphasis is now on the nuclear family of “me, my wife and my children” at the expense of other members of the wider family network, especially the older ones who look to the younger generation to provide them with economic security in old age. The government does not provide social security for older persons. These changes in family structure in Nigeria have caused gradual disintegration of the extended family and of the communal sense of living in Nigerian society.

Neglect of filial obligations due to these structural changes has further impoverished older people and created more physical and social distance between family members. A lot of these older people have resolved to beg in

order to survive or getting employed as cleaners, security guards, load carriers, or petty traders. It is gratifying to note that social support traditionally given to older persons still exists: daughters and daughters-in-law coming to the rescue of older people – though sometimes with adverse effects to their own health and domestic relationship.

Traditionally, the older person heads the family and the extended clan that dominates the communities. They represent their families in the Council of Elders meetings where decisions are taken to regulate and promote the general interest of citizens and to administer the affairs of their communities. They used to play leadership roles in the society and were seen as repositories of wisdom. The elderly in the Nigeria society carry out traditional roles of guardians of the ancestral values, chief custodians of society's treasures and upholders of history, customs, folklores, cultural values, and wisdom.

Older persons settle disputes and conflicts arising from members of the family, based on their position, skill, knowledge, wisdom, vision and experience acquired along the journey to old age. They are extra-legal and political institutions through which the society's orderliness and progress is sustained. The older persons have remained traditional medicine practitioners as healers, diviners and herbalists who complement orthodox medical and health service delivery especially in areas where Primary Health Care is non-existent.

In Nigeria, the family is charged with the responsibility for the provision of care and support for the older person. Such care and support are voluntary and reciprocal, without any form of compensation. Family members, especially adult children, form the bulwark of informal support for older persons. The care of the older relative is a value which is culturally rooted and highly respected.

Care Provision for Older People in Nigeria

The lack of state provision of eldercare in Nigeria requires the family to provide the needs for the survival of the older people. Family members provide food, shelter, clothing, drugs and other basic necessities. Children now play the most important role of providing economic security in old age. Older parents live in their adult children's homes and receive care. On the other hand, they support their children in taking care of their grandchildren. When they live in their own homes, grandchildren or other relatives often live with them to give support such as washing clothes, running errands, cooking meals and taking general care of the older people's environment.

The decline in the economy, gradual disintegration of the extended family system, unemployment, increasing female employment to complement family income, as well as rural-urban migration all contribute to the noticeable decline in the level of care provided by the family in recent times. The participation of government at all levels, Federal, Regional (States) and Local Councils, in the provision of services to the older person is minimal. The Nigerian government and political leaders believe that the provision of care is the responsibility of families. Policy emphasis is more on young people, women and children.

NGOs and faith-based organizations such as the African Gerontological Society, AGES Nigeria, the Catholic Church, and the Sorophormist Society are examples of organizations in Nigeria that make effective contributions to the service provision to older people through day-care centres, residential homes, libraries, regular medical check-up's, creating a forum for raising the awareness on older people's rights and avenues to seek redress when necessary. In all Nigeria there are ten residential care homes – facing an elderly population of over 5 million.

The standard in these care homes is inadequate; most of them are owned by religious organizations such as the Catholic Church. Some of these homes are hospices where young people with terminal diseases or babies with life-threatening diseases are also kept.

A crucial problem is the general assumption in Nigerian society that care for older people has always been provided by the extended social/family system – and that this provision of care services has always been adequate. This assumption is wrong, as recent research has shown (Apt 1995; Aboderin 2006).

Medical care is not easily accessible. Most older persons cannot afford quality medical care; the geographical distance to get to these services make it difficult, if not impossible for many older people to access, particularly in the rural areas. Hence, their health needs still have to be met by visiting traditional medicine men and herbalists.

At the family level, care services provided do not adequately meet the needs of the old person in Nigeria. Diminishing economic power has hindered the willing family member's capability to give. Priorities are given to the needs of the members of the nuclear family – spouse and children – at the expense of older family members: parents or grandparents. Care provided by the family attempts to satisfy the needs of older persons. But with changing social and economic configurations, older persons are most of the time left in the care of strangers i.e. people who are not properly trained to be caregivers, many of them uneducated, young and frustrated.

Social Policy and Old Age

In Nigeria today, social security policies for old age are yet to be formulated. But there is an increasing need in the wake of the apparent decline in the adequacy of material family support that has occurred in recent times and the rising deprivation and poverty to which growing numbers of older people are exposed (Aboderin 2006). The lack of a social security system for older people accelerates this process. The notion that investments in ones children serves as social security in old age is now disputed as adult children find it difficult securing employment and receiving an income sufficient to meet their immediate needs.

The Contributory Pension Scheme (insurance) that was recently reformed does not cover many older persons. This pension scheme is mainly designed for those who work(ed) in the formal sector. The scheme bedevilled with a lot of problems is yet to make appreciable impact on the lives of older people. Old Age brings with it reduced capacity for work, as well as difficulties in accessing health care and other essential services, increasing the likelihood of older persons becoming and remaining poor.

The lack of social pensions has serious consequences on the well being of the older persons. The majority of older people who cannot earn an income and are not covered by the contributory pension scheme are left at the mercy of the vagaries of life. Social pensions reduce old age poverty and support households. Social pensions target development aid to the poorest and contribute significantly to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The local economies are regenerated and wealth distributed, and general household health and nutrition are improved.

For the privileged proportion of the population that is lucky to work in the formal sector, arrangement for social security funds is always made. In the African circumstances where the proportion of the population employed in the formal

sector is very small, the numbers of elderly who benefit from this type of social security scheme are very few. The present economic realities of Nigeria with a harsh government reform programme, with little or no consideration for the older people, has created an army of beggars. Material deprivation and neglect of older people has emerged as an increasingly visible social problem particularly in cities.

Elder Abuse and Neglect

Cases of elder abuse occur every day in Nigeria. But abuse of older persons still has to be regarded as a taboo in Nigerian society that makes it difficult to report cases to the Law Enforcement Agencies. Aside from the provisions of the Criminal Code related to crimes of violence and assault there is yet no law on elder abuse. Though, creation of awareness of abuse as a public health and social issue has been intensified since the first World Elder Abuse Awareness Day took place in most major cities in Nigeria in 2006 it is yet to receive the appropriate attention it deserves from the society and the government.

A lot of policymakers, lawmakers, the older persons and members of the society have begun to see elder abuse as a menace that needs the attention of all especially as older persons become more vulnerable in the countries with economies in transition.

Conclusions

In almost forty seven years of independence from colonial administration Nigeria is yet to enact a National Policy on the care and welfare of older persons. Since March 2003 it has remained in draft form. The challenges of bureaucratic bottlenecks have hampered approval of the draft for implementation.

Though the National Social Development Policy (1989) stipulates the main objective in respect of older persons and allocates responsibilities – the policy has proven to be ineffective. The provisions in these policies are elegant and pious, just words without deeds. Though the Criminal Code makes it an offence if an individual charged with the responsibility to provide the necessities of life to anyone who is unable by reason of age, sickness, unsoundness of mind, detention or any other cause it does not have any consequences for the offender.

In a stakeholders meeting convened to domesticate and adapt the Africa Union Framework Policy on care and welfare for older persons in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, in August 2006 efforts were made to develop a comprehensive policy to be forwarded to the National Assembly for ratification and subsequent implementation.

At the moment there is no Social Security Scheme policy in old age. The Contributory Pension Scheme with 7.5% contributions paid by the employer and another 7.5% by the employee affect only those in the formal sector. Artisans, farmers, fishermen, commercial drivers, etc are not included in any organized scheme of social security in old age except those with individual investments in form of shares, stocks, bonds. There is need for tax-relief in respect of maintenance of close relatives such as widowed mothers, or mothers-in-law or relatives incapacitated by old age or infirmity.

To achieve the target of halving poverty by the year 2015 according to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and improving the living condition of older persons in Nigeria there is the need for an urgent redirection and refocus on the issues of ageing in Nigeria and the sub-Saharan region of Africa as there are dramatic changes in ageing in the developing countries.

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