

## **"THE FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZEN: AT A GLANCE"**

by

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### **INTRODUCTION**

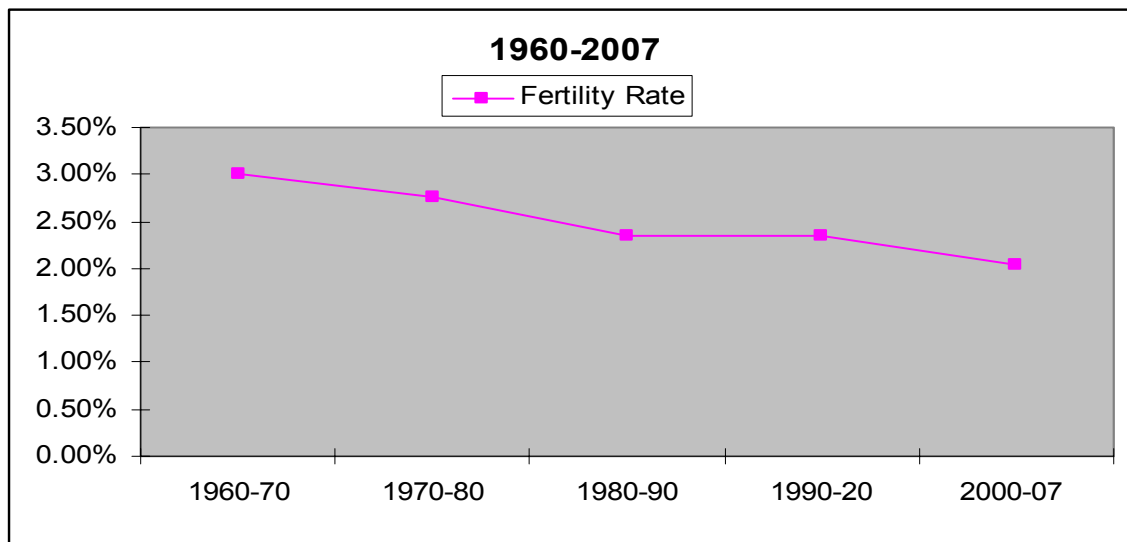
The Philippines age structure is generally younger than that of the developed countries but still significantly older than that of the developing countries.<sup>1</sup> It is home to 5.8 million (NSO 2008) senior citizens, which is one of the largest in the Asia Pacific Region. It presage that ageing of the population is a phenomenon not only for developed but also to developing countries. Given the distinctive characteristic of the plight of senior citizen in different countries, this paper will showcase the Philippine demography, government initiatives, senior citizen categorization in the community, salient issues as well as their distinct contribution and resiliency despite the adversities and socio-economic pressure aggravated by degenerative diseases common to old age and the high prevalence of communicable diseases which is still existing in the country.

In the Philippine Constitution, it states that, it is the duty of the family to take care of its disabled members while the State may design program of social security for them and it shall adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach to health development which shall endeavor to make essential goods, health and other social services available to all the people at affordable cost. These shall be priority for the needs of the underprivileged, sick, elderly, disabled, women and children." The Philippine law classify a person as senior citizen based on age (60 years old and above), they are entitled to discounts in medicines, basic commodities, health services and socio-recreational activities.

Successful ageing in the Philippines is the fulfillment of the desire of the elderly for a more comfortable life not only for themselves but also for their children<sup>2</sup>. Senior citizen in each country has different set of features and dynamics that are attributed to the economic, social, cultural and historical occurrences. This document will also provide a glimpse on the emerging issues and concerns faced by the Filipino senior citizen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and recommend a call for action for stakeholders to address critical situation and complexities brought about by the ageing of population in the Philippines.

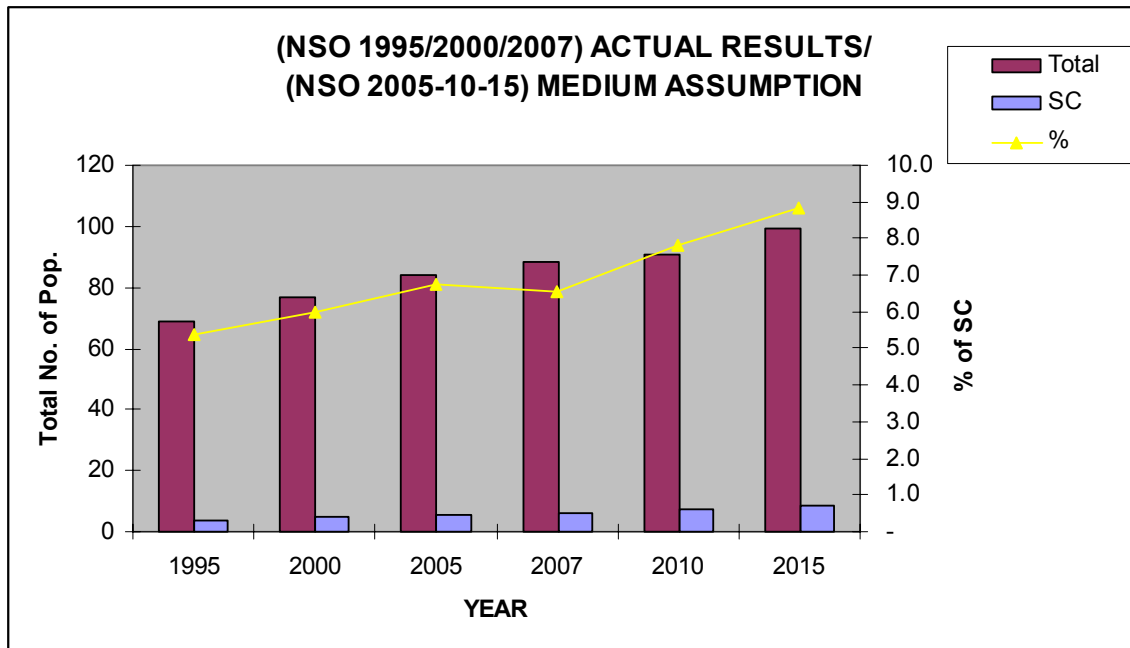
**DEMOGRAPHY OF THE FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZEN**

The rapidly increasing absolute number of Filipino senior citizens which is attributed to its declining fertility rate and increasing life expectancy and the density of Filipinos that are becoming 60's. The recent Philippine Census in 2007 had figured an average annual population growth rate of 2.04%. As shown below, it was the lowest annual growth rate recorded for the Philippines since the 1960s (NSO 2008).



The declining fertility rate and the increasing percentage, jointly by the projected percentage of the senior citizen is highlighted to put into the picture that the uphill trend will be irreversible, it will contradicts the notion that the Philippine society is relatively a young population.

The succeeding chart will provide the total number of the population and actual number of senior citizen based on the actual NSO survey on 1995, 2000 and 2007. This is one case scenario where the fertility rate is going down while the number of senior citizen is rapidly increasing.



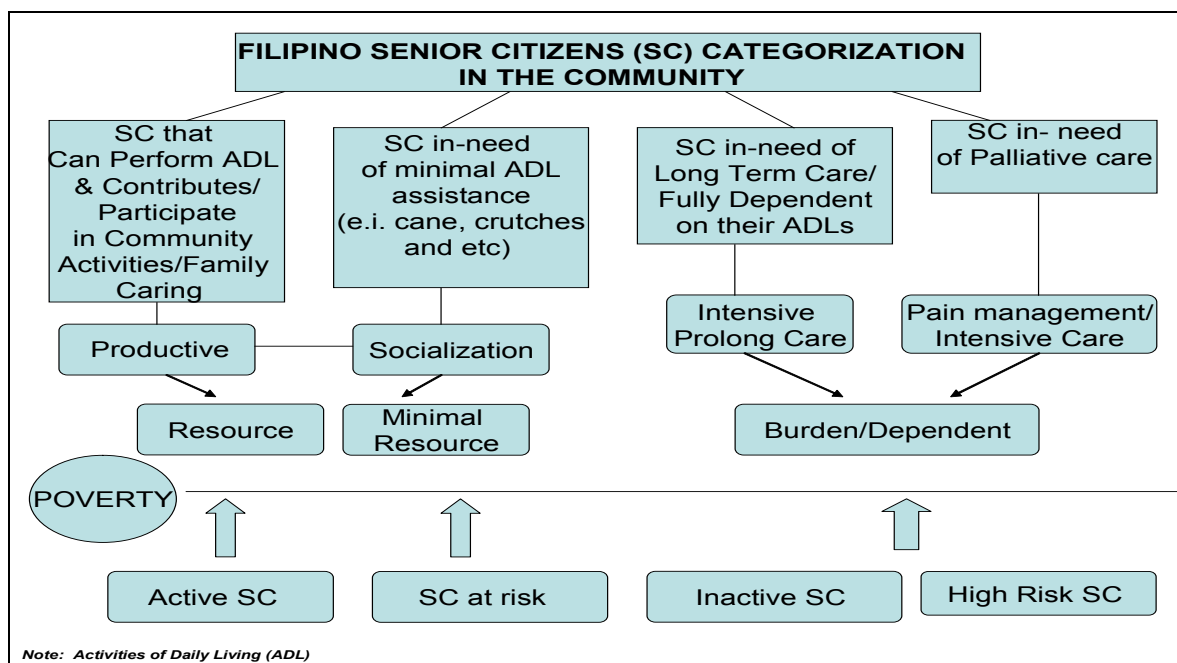
YEAR	PER MILLION/S		%
	Total No. of Pop.	Total No. of SC	
1995	68.62	3.7	5.4
2000	76.5	4.6	6.0
2005	84.21	5.68	6.7
2007	88.57	5.8	6.5
2010	90.46	7.06	7.8
2015	99.01	8.72	8.8

Note: 1995/2000/2007 are based on actual NSO survey  
 Source: NSO [www.census.gov.ph](http://www.census.gov.ph)

The 2000 Census of Population and Housing registered 4.6 million senior citizens, accounting for 5.97% of the total population. This number registered a 22.18% increase from 1995 (3.7 million people). The elderly population grew at 4.39% during the 1995 to 2000 period, higher when compared to the 1990 to 1995 growth rate of 3.06%. If the growth rate continues, the number of senior citizens is expected to reach seven million in 2010 and to double in approximately 16 years<sup>3</sup>.

In 2015, there will be 8.8% or more than 8.72 million Filipino senior citizens. At 2050, the Philippines will be ranked No. 10 as the most populous country in the world<sup>4</sup>. It will continuously increase in a very fast phase, making it as a challenge that will left the country unprepared to respond to this occurrences that would threatened its strong familial relationship and unforeseen impact to its culture, society and economy.

**FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZENS IN THE COMMUNITY**



Majority of the Filipino senior citizens still lives in their own home or community, thus, it is essential to look into the level of their physical functioning and circumstances affected by poverty. The above framework represents the Filipino senior citizen situation "in a nut shell" at the community/home which is divided into four main categories:

- Active SC- can perform Activities of Daily Living (ADL), independent and contributes in the community by participating Senior Citizens Organizations (SCOs) and /or taking care of the family members or doing household chores.
- SC at risk- can perform basic ADL and would need assistive devices. They are still healthy but have limitations on their physical activities and mostly stay at home.
- Inactive SC- they would require continuous medication and are fully dependent on others for their ADL for a prolonged period.
- High Risk SC- they would need specialized high-cost medication to ease the pain and with life threatening disease, they are fully dependent on their ADL.

Poverty in old age remains to be the primary precipitating factor, whether they would be categorized as resource, minimal resource, dependent or burden. Those who have the capacity to pay can access medical services and acquire quality care. Also, remaining active in community and household activities could deter the transition of being active to burden.

### **GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR SENIOR CITIZEN**

The Philippine Government is one of the signatory to the Madrid International Plan of Action for Older Persons and also in the forefront in the conceptualization and ratification of the previous international plans (e.g. Macau Plan of Action for Older Person 1998 and Shanghai Implementation Strategy 2002). The Philippine constitution recognizes the positive role of older citizens in our society; encouraging them to contribute to nation-

building and to develop community organization as well as providing support to NGOs working for the older citizens.

The salient features of the law are the provision of privileges in the form of discount in the purchasing of medicines and basic commodities for the personal enjoyment of the senior citizen (i.e. movies house, recreational places and etc) and establishments of the Office of the Senior Citizens Affairs (OSCA) to be headed by a senior citizen. It is mandated to fully implement the provisions and serves as link of the senior citizen and Senior Citizens Organizations (SCOs) to its local government.

### **FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZEN AS THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY**

Families in less developed countries are well positioned to provide informal care because they are larger, stronger connected, and more multigenerational than in developed countries.<sup>5</sup> While it is true that the Filipino Family remains to be resilience and extended in nature, there is a distinguished role of the senior citizen within the family.

More than half of the household population 60 years old and over (57.41%) were household heads and nearly one-fourth was spouses of the household heads. Of the total number of households in the Philippines (15.3 million), 17.13% (2.6 million households) were headed by senior citizens<sup>6</sup>. The head of the family provides direct supervision to the children left behind by overseas worker and managed the households.

Looking at this unique familial relationship, it is essential that relevant studies should be undertaken to look into the special contribution of the senior citizen in the Filipino family. Nonetheless, this could be the effects of the feminization of the Filipino migrant workers especially in the health sector, which is attributed to the ageing population in developed countries where Filipino health care workers are the most in-demand due to their innate values of taking care of their senior citizen. But, Filipinos are still

unaware on the effects of this generational lost, where the grandparent replaces the responsibilities and roles of the biological parents in providing care and guidance to their children.

## **CHALLENGES OF THE FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZEN IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

New situations which face us a result of the changing population and family structures and the inadequacy of our public services should be seen as *challenges*, not problems. (Bond John, Coleman Peter 1990). One of the main challenges of the Filipino senior citizen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is still poverty and lack of healthcare.

The recent worldwide recession aggravated by the lack of safety nets and social protection remains to be the primary obstacle to achieved quality of life especially to the senior citizen. It is the most substantial issues that are being faced by every country, most especially in the developing countries like the Philippines were the average poverty incidence of population is 32.9%<sup>7</sup>. The Filipino family safeguards the interest of its members, but the ill effect of poverty to the most vulnerable member of the family like the senior citizen and children, to be left behind from their rightful entitlements. Filipino senior citizen in poverty is pervasive, yet, it still not being given critical attention.

Nonetheless, moreover the pattern of disease at the end of life is changing and more people are living with serious chronic circulatory and respiratory diseases as well as with cancer, despite evidence of dramatically increased need for supportive and palliative care, this area has been relatively neglected in health policy and research.<sup>8</sup> It's true that until now, majority of Filipino senior citizens have been cared at home but, let's not take for granted that there is an increasing number of old-old category, which means there is a higher possibility that they will be dependent due to high risk in communicable and degenerative diseases. Given that majority of senior

citizen lacks healthcare insurance aggravated by high cost of medical services, thus, most of the senior citizen has been fully dependent on government medical subsidy.

In the Philippines, communicable diseases are still widespread and considering the weak resistance of the senior citizen, they have been more likely to suffer due to poverty and limited access and inadequate health services<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, Filipinos senior citizen and their family are still unaware on the cognitive problems attributed to old age and family carer burnout, thus, it requires comprehensive interventions, combining the medical and psychosocial aspect in dealing with the adverse effect of cognitive impairment to the senior citizen and their family.

### **A CALL FOR ACTION**

It is important to note that scientific concern for the elderly in the Philippines is new, probably due to two factors, namely, the relatively small size of the elderly population and cultural perception that the elderly do not pose a problem to society because they are taken care of by the family. While the proportionate size of the elderly group is comparatively low because of the youthfulness of the Philippine age structure, the rate growth of the elderly population has been substantially and progressively high.<sup>10</sup>

The Philippine scenario is comparable to other developing countries or economies in transition, there is a need to provide emphasis on improving the quality of life through research and policy/programme development responsive to the emerging needs of the senior citizen. In responding to the predicament of having the highest absolute number of senior citizens in the Asia Pacific region and the lack of health care insurance, there is a need to develop cadre of advocates especially in the Academe and helping professionals (i.e. Geriatrician, Geriatric Social Worker, Geriatric Nurses and Gerontologist) to create awareness on the challenges faced by the senior citizen and their family.

Social gerontology is a relatively new field. Being at its incipient stage, there is yet no compact bibliographic volume where researchers in gerontology can easily access locally-produced materials that centrally focus on the diverse social and cultural aspects of the Filipino aging experience.<sup>11</sup> With that, studies related to the Filipino senior citizen are quite limited and few, which is still not given emphasis due to lack of support and non-prioritization.

Looking at the ever-increasing absolute number of Filipino senior citizens, it must require a multi- stakeholder approach, to enable them to involve and participate in community development. Active participation of senior citizens in the cultural, social activities and establishment of organization that will truly represent the grass-root older persons in every local council will be a big step to enable older persons regains their lost prestige<sup>12</sup>. Drastic shift toward scientific based decisions and sharing and accessing of financial and human resources between non-governmental organizations, government agencies and SCOs to develop comprehensive, diversified and specialized programs responsive to the needs of the Filipino senior citizen should be given critical attention.

Successful and/or active ageing as a concept should be culturally tailored, for the Filipino, it is the continuous support of the senior citizen to their family whether in the forms of financial, taking care of their grandchildren and contributing to their communities by joining SCOs. Given the extended family structure in the Philippines, the Filipino family remains to be the primary carer of their member, especially to the senior citizen and it is considered as a lifetime responsibility, at the same time, senior citizen viewed their family caring role as a fulfillment and not as an unwanted role.

Poverty is the foremost obstacle in achieving active ageing in the Philippines, given the limited resources to support its burgeoning senior citizen population, the Philippines should rethink and shift its focus on enabling the

sector to become an asset through encouraging its senior citizen to contribute and volunteer for societal development. The real challenge is to proactively respond to the health care needs and poverty incidence among seniors and the strain in familial relationship attributed to migration and other factors within the Filipino family and society.

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Source: Hoff, A. (2008) Winter Newsletter 2008 of the Research Committee (RC11) on the Sociology of Aging of the International Sociological Association (ISA). Oxford: Oxford Institute of Ageing, (sneak preview).