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Ageing Policy Change – What are the Drivers of Change in Low and Middle-Income Countries?

by Ina Voelcker

No. 2010/2



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Ageing policy change – What are the drivers of change in low and middle-income countries?¹

Ina Voelcker²

This article is based on research gathered through interviews with civil servants from Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Canadaⁱ, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mozambique, Nigeria and Serbia. The research drew on the interviewees' experiences in ageing policies in their countries. Semi-structured interviews with twelve individuals were undertaken via Skype. Four of the interviewees were from transition countriesⁱⁱ, two from Latin Americaⁱⁱⁱ and five from different regions of Africa^{iv}.

Ageing policies in low and middle-income countries – necessity or luxury?

Population ageing is one of the most important global trends of the 21st century and older persons are receiving increased attention from the public and the media as well as from policy makers. Our societies are ageing in absolute and relative numbers (UN, 2009). By 2050 older persons will represent 22% of the world's population, while this share was 8% in 1950 and 11% in 2009 respectively (UN, 2009). Although the "more developed" world still has a higher percentage of older persons (21.4% compared to 8.5% in less developed countries), the older population of the "less developed" world is increasing rapidly (UN, 2009). Consequently, by 2050 80% of the world's older people will live in "less developed" countries (UN, 2009).

This dilemma of countries becoming old prior to becoming rich is reflected in the double challenge of population ageing and achieving a higher level of economic and social development. This has profound implications for whole societies as well as for every individual, young or old. Despite the challenges population ageing presents to, for

¹ This study was supported by staff of various HelpAge offices across the world which facilitated the access to the interviewees. At this point, the author would therefore like to express her highest gratefulness to Sylvia Beales and Mark Gorman and many other colleagues for their support. A full report of the study can be requested via ina.voelcker@gmail.com.

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instance, health care or pension systems, ageing societies also open up opportunities. Older persons contribute to their communities and families through unpaid care or voluntary work as well as through financial transfers. Population ageing has been recognized as a triumph by many but this achievement also implies acceptance of the fundamental challenge, “to add life to the years that have been added to life” (UN, 1991).

Already in 1948, the issue of ageing and older persons’ rights should have received a place on the international policy agenda through the advocacy efforts of the Government of Argentina (Zelenev, 2006), but it was not until 1982, in Vienna, that the first major step was achieved with the First World Assembly on Ageing. The recommendations of the Vienna Plan, in conjunction with other legal mandates from the United Nations (UN) secured the issues of ageing a place on the international policy agenda (UNFPA, 2008:2). This includes a range of events and documents, such as the Principles for Older People (UN, 1991), the International Year of Older Persons 1999 proclaimed in 1992 (UN, 1992) and the adoption of some regional action plans, e.g. the Macau Plan of Action on Ageing (UNESCAP, 2000). Ageing in the developing world was finally focussed upon at the Second World Assembly of Ageing in Madrid in 2002 at which member states committed themselves to a political declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) (UN, 2003).

Despite this progress, public discussions in the media give the impression that the implications arising from ageing populations are mainly seen as a burden rather than as a challenge (see for example Gee, 2002; Martin et al., 2009). Additionally, the awareness of these challenges (or “burdens”), in particular with regard to pension systems, appears to be increasing. Nonetheless, many policy discourses, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2000) still do not relate population ageing to the overall development discourse.

In spite of these international achievements and the increasing awareness of this issue at UN level as well as on national levels (UNFPA, 2008:25), much remains to be done. To shed light on the reasons for this discrepancy we need to reveal the factors that policy makers consider in adopting actions in support of ageing – ageing policies and legislation that target any kind of “successful adjustment to an ageing world” (UN, 2003:12). These

can be either age-specific policies or age-integrated policies that address implications of population ageing. This article draws on research into the factors that guided twelve policy makers – predominantly from low and middle-income countries – to make these decisions while paying particular attention to the role of the international community and the civil society (in particular regarding the narratives surrounding older people). Accordingly, the results may shed light on the value and importance of global policy documents, such as the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the MDGs, and the significance of participatory approaches to policymaking.

International drivers and their role in national policymaking

The extent to which international agencies, mainly UN agencies, influence domestic policymaking varies widely between the different regions. While there was a strong sentiment of dependence on technical and financial support from UN agencies in sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Mozambique and Nigeria) and former transition countries (Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Serbia), this opinion was much weaker in the other regions. In Latin America, here represented by Argentina and Brazil, it was felt that actually the opposite occurs: that the governments in conjunction with other actors from the country or region (attempt to) influence the international policy agenda. For example, Argentina and Brazil are beginning to play a leading role in the campaign for the adoption of a UN Convention on the Rights of Older People. For domestic policy change in these countries, however, the interviewee from the Ministry of Health in Brazil concludes that internal factors are crucial. Despite this, it was commonly held by most interviewees that international events such as the International Year of Older Persons in 1999 also play an important role.

The main challenge identified by the interviewees from the sub-Saharan African countries is the prioritization of some international commitments at the expense of others:

“That was happening in 1999 and then in the year 2000 the MDGs came up and it [the issue of ageing] is not mentioned, it doesn’t really get a place. So it’s a logical thing.”

While there was a strong sentiment regarding lack of funding due to the concentration on the MDGs in sub-Saharan Africa, technical and financial support plays a major role in policy changes that are occurring in the transition countries and are therefore highly valued. This includes for example support in terms of national capacity building from the UN Programme on Ageing (UN, 2010a).

In addition to the issues surrounding funding, the issue of timing must also be highlighted. While the International Year of Older Persons in 1999 seems to have had a positive effect, it is seen as a diversion because it was only one year later that the MDGs took precedence and efforts were redirected to the achievement of these. Timing was also mentioned as being an important factor in the adoption of national policy initiatives in Canada:

“The timing was perfect, it was an alignment of policy thinking, and policy initiatives. The provinces saw to their advantage to embark on the WHO initiative, because it gave a lot of credibility.”

International commitments and other influences of international origin can give legitimacy and recognition to the civil society of each individual nation, policy makers as well as the media and the public. Hence, in addition to the growing awareness, the availability of funding and the timing, the international community provides national policy makers with credibility. This influence from international policy documents, however, could be strengthened if policy makers had access for instance to a document that shows the signatures of the country’s representatives at the Second World Assembly on Ageing (Rayapova, 2010). This would empower the policy advocates’ call for change.

Other international commitments, such as those prescribed by the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, seem to have some influence on domestic policies in particular in sub-Saharan Africa. Others, however, make no mention of the Plan nor seem to be even aware of it. In particular countries where interviewees mentioned international commitments being of great significance, it is hoped that the review of the Plan at the occasion of its tenth anniversary in 2012 might assist in advancing policy changes. Some of the interviewees, who did not attribute a lot of importance to the Plan where domestic policymaking was concerned, did however mention the significance of regional meetings,

for example conferences organized by the African Research on Ageing Network (AFRAN). That said, furthering the implementation of the MIPAA goals in the African region is one of the expressed objectives of AFRAN and hence, the international community seems to have an indirect, if hidden effect.

Some policy makers feel that they, as well as civil society, have to proceed “*hand-in-hand*” with donor agencies, which seem to prioritise the achievement of the MDGs. As a result, it is of utmost importance that international agencies provide funding for those issues relating to population ageing. This problem, however, could be solved by understanding the age dimension of poverty and that the mandate of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, for instance, builds on existing commitments of social development. The Plan emphasises that programmes aimed to achieve the MDGs need to include older people as this will contribute to meeting the aims of the MDGs (UN, 2003:para. 81 (b)). This is for example ensured through the contributions of older women in reducing child mortality (Goal 4) by giving advice to pregnant women.

In short, the extent and direction of influence between the international community and the countries varies between the regions. While there was a feeling among Latin and North American interviewees that there are certainly links to UN agencies, it seems that these countries influence the international agenda, while the sub-Saharan countries seem to be influenced by it.

Despite these influences of international origin, this alone is not sufficient to achieve policy change. The availability of funding and international commitments is unlikely to achieve major policy changes if nation states are not conscious of the need to adjust to an ageing world. Hence, the next section discusses the influences of the narratives surrounding older people’s roles and how this affects national policymaking.

Civil society forces and narratives surrounding older people’s roles

The role of domestic drivers, primarily in terms of pressure groups, NGOs as well as the wider society, seems to vary significantly between the different regions. This appears to be considerably linked to how older persons are viewed by society and whose

responsibility it is to care for this cohort. While in Argentina and Brazil social security is widely seen as a citizen's right, in the sub-Saharan African countries old age social security is not even understood to be a government duty but rather a private, family responsibility. Wide gaps exist in how older people are viewed and who is responsible for them.

Consequently, the way older people actively engage also varies between these two regions: pensioner associations, as one of the strongest interest groups among older people, have achieved substantial policy changes in Brazil, whereas the policy makers from the sub-Saharan African countries jointly state that the pressure of older people is largely minimal and must be stronger in order to achieve changes.

It was a shared sentiment among many of the interviewees that policy instruments, such as Senior Citizens' Councils, empower older people and foster the advancement of older persons' issues. Interestingly, with respect to stronger advocacy among older persons the Nigerian interviewees mentioned that older people have an altruistic mindset and would therefore be unlikely to campaign for their own interests but rather for their grandchildren's interests:

“And even they [referring to older people] would vote for any money coming in going to their grandchildren rather than to them, because they have this selfless sort of mindset.”

Further, in the case of at least one developed country, one barrier to policy change cited by a senior policy maker was that *“there are perceptions that seniors are already well off”*.

Despite these observations, it is seen as vital to activate this population group in order to gain political will and to design policies that really address older persons' issues. In addition to the perceived lack of participation by older people, it was also identified as a problem that the group of older people is not homogeneous and does not share single interests. They *“coalesce on some issue like pensions, but on many other issues they don't coalesce”*. Therefore, it is seen as difficult for them to build a strong political force. Notably, older persons in some instances do not even agree on shared issues like pensions

– thereby reflecting the huge inequalities that exist between different older people’s groups (formal vs. informal workers). These “disputes” amongst older people might be overcome by launching holistic policy initiatives whereby everybody can identify him/herself easily. One such initiative, the Age-friendly Cities programme of WHO (2007), “*captures so much of seniors in their communities*” and hence, a shared interest could be identified to facilitate a coalition between many older persons. They could then have a strong voice in local or governmental policymaking.

Another example of a policy instrument facilitating further policy change comes from Brazil. This “Estatuto do Idoso” was ratified by the newly elected President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva as one of his first actions in 2003 (Federal Senate, 2003). It serves as an orientation point for many other government policies as well as a reference point for pressure groups. The Argentinean voice however was more critical when it came to the role of policy instruments in facilitating policy change or political participation, “*because when something is just a law, it doesn’t mean it gets implemented*”.

Interviewees, amongst others from Kyrgyzstan and Mozambique, mention that an important starting point for the development of an agenda on ageing must begin with the constitution of the country. Reference to older people in the constitution was seen as a way to adopt further legislation or policies that address older persons either directly or indirectly.

In addition to the importance of and challenges faced in the creation of a strong political voice among older people as well as the significant role of policy instruments, many interviewees stated the importance of imposing pressure upon politicians just before elections. This is more significant in countries in which the electorate is predominantly made up of older people. In Canada, for example, a driver for the adoption of policies is:

“the growing older population, the recognition that there is a need to be responsive to them as a large and growing group and a politically vocal group.”

In opposition to this Canadian experience the Argentinean interviewee when referring to the findings of a study on the political participation of older people stated,

“older people don’t have any political participation. In general, older people always vote, it is obligatory, but they are not particularly taken into account in election campaigns of politicians, even though they represent a high percentage of the voting population.”

At this point it has to be noted that older people may not have a strong political voice when it comes to the promotion of their own, age-specific interests, but they are politically influential when it comes to the advocacy of other people’s rights, as exemplified by the “Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo“ (2010). In addition to direct influence on policy makers, pressure groups could also help to raise the awareness among younger people that everybody gets old eventually and that policies implemented today will affect the older persons of the future.

Conclusion

The international community was seen as a provider of technical and financial support, credibility and awareness as well as an entity that sets standards. Global events such as the International Year of Older Persons in 1999 seem to have had a clear influence on national policymaking, while international commitments like the UN International Plan of Action on Ageing also seem important, but are more dependent on the country’s context. While not legally binding, documents such as the Plan exert influence on governments through civil society organisations where international commitments lend credibility and are used as a guiding framework. However, in order to generate increased political will, it seems of utmost importance to put population ageing on the international development agenda. Even though there is no direct reference to older people and ageing in the MDGs, policy makers need to make a connection between mainstream development agendas and age-specific agendas as suggested in the Plan. To illustrate this, the aim to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 (Goal 1) does not directly address older people but social protection policies, including old age pensions, contribute to a large extent to achieving this goal. Drawing more explicit links between the international development and ageing agendas, however, will have a multitude of positive effects: first, it increases credibility and awareness, second, it increases available funding,

which in turn, augments the level of research and hence, the existence of research-based evidence, this being identified by the interviewees as one important driver of policy change.

With respect to the internal forces around advocacy coalitions the main findings are that on the one hand, older persons may not want to express a strong voice that is calling the government to directly support them, while on the other hand, older persons do not have a strong, joint voice due to the lack of common interests. Acknowledging these points, it seems difficult actually to make use of the bottom-up approach for policy influence. Since this is one of the main strategies followed by international, national and local institutions and also by the Plan of Action on Ageing, questions may need to be raised as to the extent that this approach is suitable for ageing policies. The lack of a strong political voice among older people resulting from a lack of common interests could be tackled by strengthening existing networks or cooperation with local organisations across different topics in order to give this group a unified political voice. The establishment of umbrella organisations may provide one way to bring groups of older people with different interests together and build a strong political voice with shared interests. At this point, policies or legislation to include older persons facilitate advocacy groups' actions and may change existing narratives of older people as a political inactive group in the long-term. The narratives that persist also influence the kind of research (if any) which is undertaken and how the results get channelled into the policy arena before being utilised. Even though policy instruments, such as a National Policy on Ageing, help to implement further policies and programmes as they give legitimacy to pressure groups, this will not lead to major policy changes if the image of older people in society does not improve. This is one point where one can refer back to the international community, which is promoting an image of active ageing (WHO, 2002).

Broadly speaking, this study's findings confirm that the approach taken by the United Nations in the Plan seems to be on the right track. Overall, the double burden of population ageing and socioeconomic development can best be tackled if all stakeholders, politicians, researchers and practitioners, as well as the whole society, young and old, acknowledge the significance of and contribute to the "adjustments to an ageing world". Only this approach can guarantee that the enormous numbers of older people and the

increasingly smaller numbers of younger people cannot only add years to life but also life to years. Younger generations will depend on older generations the same way as older generations depend on younger generations and therefore, the intergenerational approach taken by the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing must be implemented as soon as possible.

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ⁱ Please note that while data from the Canadian interview contributed to a better understanding of the drivers of change in low and middle income countries, Canada is not considered to be part of the low and middle-income country grouping.

ⁱⁱ Represented by Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Serbia (UN, 2010b).

ⁱⁱⁱ Represented by Argentina and Brazil (UN, 2010b).

^{iv} Represented by Cameroon, Mozambique and Nigeria (UN, 2010b). Note that these countries are all part of sub-Saharan Africa.

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