

THE ROLE OF SENIOR CITIZEN'S COMMITTEES (*WADIHITY SAMITHI*) IN ERADICATING NEW FORM OF POVERTY

C.M. Munasingharachchi

National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka

Abstract: The last two national censuses in Sri Lanka demonstrate a transformation in the population structure of the country. The current proportion of elderly population in Sri Lanka is higher than the proportion in other South Asian countries. The concept of senior citizens' committee is implemented by the government under the Protection of the Rights of Elders Act, No 9 of 2000 with the active participation of the community sector. This study examined the contribution of Senior Citizen committees in addressing socioeconomic needs of the elderly within their own local community. The assumption was that they were mostly unable to meet many of their financial needs within the family system due to a range of reasons and as a result, dependency, abuses and emotional suffering etc. have been characteristic facts in their daily living. The study was conducted in Kahatagasdigiliya Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division and looked at how the conducive socio-cultural and recreational environment within Senior Citizen Societies contributes to active economical participation. Purposive sampling was used to get insights in this regard by applying both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The committees promote and provide opportunity for lifelong learning and active ageing so people can be active and resilient, stay connected and increase their economic wellbeing, especially in independency. Community resources are not enough to support the societies and also it has not been the community priority for their limited resources.

Keywords: Senior Citizen's Committees, Elder Rights, Poverty Eradication, Active Aging

Introduction

The last two national censuses in Sri Lanka demonstrate a transformation in the population structure of the country. The current proportion of elderly population in Sri Lanka is higher than the proportion in other South Asian countries. Therefore, predictions of future trends confront the prospect of a further steadily ageing population (Department of Census and Statistics: 1993; 1997). In 2001, 9.2% of Sri Lanka's population was 60 years of age and older, which is a relatively large elderly population for a developing country (Department of Census and Statistics: 2001). This was projected to be 12.5% by 2011, and will be 24.8% by 2041, almost a quarter of the total population of the country. During the period between 1981-2001, the growth rate of the older population in the country has well surpassed the total population growth rate, recording 3.3% versus 1.2% respectively (Siddhisena: 2001; 2005). It is an increase of over 100%. Population experts say that this increase is due largely to two reasons: (1) Increasing longevity and (2) declining birth rate. According to some accounts, both direct and indirect effects of international migration have also been a significant reason (Siddhisena: 2005). Inevitably, this trend of population ageing in the country will create a situation of an increased demand for care and support services for the elderly, both in the community and in residential care settings. One will argue that Sri Lanka already has a strong community-based informal system of care for the elderly in the country, and therefore there is no need to 'panic'. Yet, it is not the realistic situation. The reasons can be summarized into two factors: (1) In an increasingly interconnected world, developing countries, especially many of the economically

fast growing countries like Sri Lanka, undergo a significant social transformations. As a result, the generations-old strong community sector seems to be weakening and some of its functions, for example informal systems to care for the elderly, are gradually weakening (2) Emigration of the young people and young adults from developing countries is reducing the population that could care for the aged in the community. For example, Sri Lanka is internationally well documented as one of the leading countries where almost all types of modern migration movements originate from (IOM: 2014). Cumulative effects of both trends have created a problematic situation of informal caring for the elderly within family. Hence it is evident that there is tension in Sri Lanka between what existed in the past and the new community context where family, extended family and community level informal care for the elderly are fast becoming no longer possible.

The significant fact is that, even though demographic trends of becoming an ageing society have been evident for some years now, ageing and the aged is yet to be a topic in serious social policy dialog in the country. As it is emphasized even in the United Nations Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing, ageing and its' accompanying issues around care, recognition, respect and dignity should no longer only be a serious concern for developed countries (UNO: 2002; UNO: 2001). So, Sri Lanka has to act to diffuse the tension. Having a hard look at the changes occurring in current informal care systems and the challenges it presents, and reviewing existing social policy in relation to the aged care in the country is an important timely requirement. It will be an action of putting tomorrow's crucial issue on today's agenda.

Background

After the institutionalizing most of the elders have to adjust themselves to the new environment. When they were in their house they had neighbors, friends, children etc. Then after institutionalizing they lose their relationship, properties and all the things which they earned. They can't bear these things suddenly. Not only that, but also, those elders who are in later age of life have many wishes in their lives, such as receiving love and affection from the children, grandchildren, feeling of belonging etc. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) clearly identifies older people as an integral part of international development. The goals and targets, such as Goal 3 - "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" - provide clear guidance to governments and other development actors that older people must be taken into account. Therefore, this study specially focuses on the responsibilities of informal elder care system in maintaining standards for the psychosocial wellbeing of elders and the challenges in the field.

Communication problems in health care may arise as a result of healthcare providers focusing on diseases and their management, rather than people, their lives and their health problems. Patient-centered approaches to care delivery in the patient encounter are increasingly advocated by consumers and clinicians and incorporated into training for healthcare providers. Moreover, this will promote the elder rights as well. However, the impact of these interventions directly on clinical encounters and indirectly on patient satisfaction, healthcare behavior and health status has not been adequately evaluated.

Sri Lankan government, along with the private and community sectors, has already taken some initiatives to address issue. The concept of senior citizens' society implemented by the government under the Protection of the Rights of Elders Act, No 9 of 2000 is, among few, one such initiative planned and implemented by the government with the active participation of the community sector. The government encourages community to form the Senior Citizen Societies (SCS), facilitate with a range of logistical support including some financial assistance, and enable the community to create a socio-culturally conducive environment to help enhance the wellbeing of the elderly people.

Older persons as economic contributors

The Madrid Plan of Action calls for taking “measures to enable the full and equal participation of older persons, in particular older women, in decision-making at all levels” (United Nations, 2002, p.15). However, for many older persons around the world this goal has not been universally achieved.

Although the Madrid Plan speaks specifically about the political participation of older persons, it is important not to overlook their economic impact as well, especially since there is usually a close correlation between economic and political power. So if older persons are seen as commanding considerable power in the market place, this will likely translate into significant political power and participation too. As a growing cohort of both producers and consumers, older persons, particularly those in high income developed countries, carry substantial weight in the economy and often hold a significant share of their country's total wealth. In Germany, for example, those over age 50 own half of the nation's wealth. Moreover, Germany's senior citizens have the spending capacity of Euro 90 billion per year, equivalent to the GDP of entire nations such as Chile, the Czech Republic and Singapore (EFILWC, 2006a and World Bank, 2006).

Methodology

This study examined the contribution of Senior Citizen Society in addressing the socio-cultural and recreational needs of the elderly within their own local community. The assumption was that they were mostly unable to meet many of their welfare and wellbeing needs within the family system due to a range of reasons and as a result, loneliness, isolation, emotional suffering etc. have been characteristic facts in their daily living. The study was conducted in Kahatagasdigiliya Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division and looked at how the conducive socio-cultural and recreational environment within Senior Citizen Societies contributes to active aging. Purposive sampling was used to get insights in this regard by applying both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Few case in-depth case studies and focus-groups with SCS were also conducted. A comparative analysis of the well-functioning and mal-functioning senior citizen societies was carried out to find out the reasons why some societies have not met the purpose while few others were functioning relatively well.

a) Research questions at an individual level

At an individual level, the underpinning interest lies in exploring how elderly people construct meaning over their course of life and which strategies they develop in everyday life in order to take part in their social environment, to express and develop themselves within their community. Thus, the concrete research questions will be: What are the representations of elderly people regarding their courses of life?

–How do elderly people experience the process of ageing, the transition into a new life period and the related changes in everyday life and everyday needs?

–How do these experiences influence social relationships, the density of social networks and the forms/possibilities of social participation?

b) The community level

The assumption the present work is based on is that the more people are dependent and the more they have functional disabilities, the less society offers them opportunities to participate and to engage in social life. Thus, from a community perspective, the research questions are concerned with the following issues:

–To what extent elderly people are perceived as community members who can return favors given by others?

–To what extent ageing can be considered as determinants of social inequality in society?

–Which opportunities are offered by community to sustain elderly people with disabilities in developing community belonging, active engagement and reciprocity?

–What hinders social participation, what kind of socially determined and constructed barriers do elderly people have to deal with?

Discussion

The first finding is that, contrary to common perceptions that older persons are physically unable to do their jobs, some elderly were still able to carry out economic activities. Agriculture was one of the income-generating activities that older persons engaged in despite the physical nature of the activity. In spite of their age, the elderly were able to grow crops and rear livestock as one male informant commented: “Engagement in economic activities varies from elderly to elderly. Some older persons are active. Personally I have land that I rent out and get money, have a milk cow that I look after and obtain milk for sale and grow ample potatoes on a commercial basis” (Key Informant, Kahatagasdigiya).

Similarly, the Elder Rights Promotion Officer had this to say: “Older persons are engaged in economic activities like commercial growing of vegetables in home garden while others are rearing cattle as well as keeping poultry”. The elderly were also engaged in making assorted locally-required craft products. Data from qualitative interviews show that older people made various handcraft items for commercial purposes. Narrating the situation, one male FGD participant put it: “We earn some money using our knowledge to make baskets, wooden handles for hoes and axes, local spears and knives using the blacksmith system. “We also make small toys items from tree stems and branches”. (M, 66 yrs).

Adopt an older person

The following method was developed to address the specific problems with residential care in rural areas. As pointed out before, older Sri Lankans who have no next of kin living locally in the rural areas are particularly affected by social exclusion and poverty. In this scheme, the person in need of care lives together with a farmer’s family on a farmstead. Again, this scheme is of mutual benefit to both parties. The elderly person receives family care and can continue to live in a rural area with the mediation of SCC.

Social Care

An enormous variety of social services for older people is offered in Sri Lanka – mostly targeted at providing an infrastructure for these services. These include clubs for senior citizens to give them an opportunity for socializing and making new social contacts, which are however more common in urban areas. The entire spectrum of social services is provided at divisional level, including care services, home care and institutional care. Population aging has major implications on health and welfare services, employment and society as a whole. The consumption of health and social care services is considerably increased among older people, and those over 65 consume four times more health services than the general population. This means that in the context of the new integrated care approach for the elderly, the adequacy of provided services must be ensured.

Visiting Services

An interesting example of good practice is preventive homecare where the SCC send people around to anyone aged 75 or older to inquire about their care needs. About 40 per cent of the people in this age group had such a visit. The currently less favorable economic climate has resulted in economic pressures specially in urban areas.

Intergenerational Leisure Programmes

The most fascinating examples of good practice we came across is SCC conducts family get-together every six months' time enabling not only the elders but also other family members to show their talents and spend quality time together. Celebration of national and religious events

The importance of policy

The policy environment is crucial in determining the effect of aging on economic growth. The problem of population aging is more a problem of rigid and outmoded policies and institutions than a problem of demographic change. Policies need to be developed that account for the natural incentives individuals have to adjust their behavior in the face of population aging. Among the most commonly mooted policy changes is to alter retirement incentives so that people can fulfill their expressed desires to work longer in response to expectations of greater longevity. More flexible old-age pension arrangements combined with increases in the official retirement age will encourage prolonged workforce participation. Legal and cultural efforts to discourage age discrimination by employers may also be required. Lifelong education programs could assist in these efforts, by helping people adapt their skills and knowledge to the demands of a changing economy. Investment in improving the health of those aged 60 or over is a further policy option. Not only does this reduce the burden on health care and social security systems, but by compressing morbidity into fewer years late in life, it also enables people to work for longer. As Zweifel, Felder, and Meiers (1999) have shown, health care costs appear to be concentrated in the last few years of life regardless of age, so population aging defers rather than increases costs. In addition to easing strains on state finances, the compression of morbidity will enable older people to continue to contribute their expertise and knowledge to economies. Policy should also encourage increased labor force participation. Upward pressure on wages is likely to increase women's participation in the workforce, and this can be complemented by policies that facilitate mothers combining work and family, such as state-funded childcare and more flexible working hours. The latter, of course, also incentivizes child rearing, with long-term impacts on the age structure.

Conclusion

In general, Senior Citizen Society has resulted in improving the social participation of elders to a greater extent. So the barriers for connection in the local community have been dealt with at least to some extent. Also, the societies promote and provide opportunity for lifelong learning and active ageing so people can be active and resilient, stay connected and increase their general wellbeing, especially in emotional aspects. Yet, it was found that such program has not been a panacea for all their social, economic and cultural problems. The vacuum in monitoring and guidance by the relevant facilitative authorities, though the provisions are well defined within the legislations, as well as the structural socio-economic, to some extent cultural as well, barriers in the locality have become the key causes for greater disparity between the well-functioning and mal-functioning societies. Community resources are not enough to support the societies and also it has not been the community priority for their limited resources. Therefore external support is essential. However, the concept seems to be well received by the elderly in the community, and prospects for creating relatively reasonable supportive environment for the elderly in the community are high if the societies are supported at least up until they become self-sufficient within their own local community context.

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