

Commentary

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A Global Ageing Society: Challenges and Policy Responses

Many nations are experiencing the effects of ageing populations. There has been an increasing focus over the last thirty years on issues relating to the ageing of society. The United Nations General Assembly endorsed an *International Plan of Action on Ageing* that was developed at the first World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982. This plan of action has been influential in guiding the evolution of creative thinking, discussion, and policy formulation relating to various challenges posed by the global ageing society. The Second World Assembly on Ageing, held in Madrid in 2002, adopted a *Political Declaration and International Plan of Action on Ageing*. This declaration was made as a response to the opportunities and challenges of population ageing in the twenty-first century and to promote the development of a society with attributes that address the requirements of all age groups. *The Plan of Action* established priorities at the international and national level in three principal areas; older persons and development; advancing health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments. The Declaration noted the rising life expectancy in many regions of the world as one of humanity's major achievements and recognized that the world is experiencing an unprecedented demographic transformation with the number of persons over age sixty expected to increase from 600 million to about 2 billion by 2050, with the proportion of the world population over age sixty doubling from ten to more than twenty percent. Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic are each projected to have more than forty percent of their respective populations over age sixty by 2050. The Declaration recognized that concerted action is required to transform the opportunities and the quality of life of men and women as they

age and to ensure the sustainability of their support systems, thus building the foundation for a society responsive to societal needs at all ages. It also stressed the fact that when ageing is embraced as an achievement, the reliance on human skills, experiences and resources of the higher age groups is naturally recognized as an asset in the growth of mature, fully integrated, humane societies.

The World Health Organization has identified the five major challenges of an Ageing Population as: Rapid Population Ageing in Developing Countries; Disability and the Double Burden of Disease; Changing an Outdated Paradigm; The Situation of Women and Ageing; and Ethics and Inequities. In developing countries socioeconomic development has often not kept up with the rapid pace of population ageing. Developed countries became affluent before they became old, whereas developing countries are growing old before a substantial increase in wealth occurs. As nations age, in parallel to changing living and working conditions, a shift in disease patterns becomes inevitable. Even as developing countries struggle with infectious diseases, malnutrition and complications from childbirth, they are faced with the rapid growth of non-communicable disease. A new paradigm is required to replace the traditional view that learning is the business of children and youth, work is the business of midlife, and retirement is the business of old age. This new paradigm would view older people as active participants in an age-integrated society and as active contributors as well as beneficiaries of development. This paradigm takes an intergenerational approach that recognizes the importance of relationships and support among and between family members and generations. Women live longer than men in almost all areas of the world. While women have the advantage of longer lives, they

are more likely than men to experience discrimination in access to education, income, work, health care, inheritance, social security measures, and political power. Women are also more likely to live to very old ages when disabilities and multiple health problems are more common. As populations age, a range of ethical considerations come to the fore; they are linked to resource allocation, intervention choices concerning delaying or hastening death, and dilemmas over long-term care and the human rights of poor and disabled older citizens.

In 2008, the World Economic Forum created the concept of Global Agenda Councils with the task of devising transformational innovation in global governance for the purpose of advancing knowledge and developing solutions for the most crucial issues facing humanity. A Council was established to address global issues associated with an ageing society. This Council has published a set of policy principles covering the challenges of ageing-related transitions; these principles cover such topics as positive attitudes to ageing, associated roles and intergenerational relationships, lifelong learning, ageing and economic destiny, achieving healthy ageing, changing world roles, civic engagement, extension of healthy life, technology to assess and help maintain cognitive fitness, social inequality in health and duration of life, and resource problems in gerontology. These topics will be discussed more fully in the May 2011 edition of *Commentary*.

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