

Addressing the Challenges of Ageing in Africa

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ABSTRACT In the past, the elderly in African societies performed very important roles, which facilitated societal growth and development. They were regarded as major contributors to virtually all aspects of their societies. However, over the years, they lost the recognition traditionally accorded them in the general scheme of things. This has created some negative impacts on the aging population in the region. This paper, therefore, examines the problems facing the elderly in contemporary African societies in view of the ongoing social change and transformation in the area. Review shows that the elderly face a number of challenges. It is recommended that governments of African countries should create welfare programmes for the elderly in their respective countries through appropriate legislations.

INTRODUCTION

Ageing has been described as the developmental and continuous processes of change in the individual right from conception to death (Atchley 1980). Simply put, it is the act or process of becoming old. Ageing is often looked at from three interrelated perspectives – physical, psychological and social. According to Wikipedia (2011), ageing in humans refers to a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social change.

It has been observed that the 20th and 21st Centuries have witnessed an unprecedented increase in world population (U.S. Department of Commerce 2007). The growth has been due to a decline in infant and childhood mortality (Human Rights Education Associate 2003). This combined with other factors such as declining fertility and increasing longevity have favored societal and/or population aging (U.S. Department of Commerce 2007). Indeed, there is generally a marked reduction in fertility rates concurrently with reduction in mortality. In countries where support systems have been put in place for the elderly (for example, the U.S.A.) the declining death rates has created some strain for these systems (Human Rights Education Associate 2003). According to the Human Rights Education Associate, the elderly persons support ratio is falling in both more or less developed regions which could further lessen the ability of societies or governments to care for their ageing population. There is, therefore, the need for greater concern for the elderly in all societies.

Frequently, ageing is discussed in regards to population ageing (also referred to as the aged, older people, older persons, the elderly, etc.). It is this social category that is being examined in this article. This choice was borne out of the concern for the peculiar precarious condition that the ageing population are being subjected to in contemporary African societies (Aboderin 2006; Oluwabamide 2009).

Today in African societies, the traditional institution responsible for care-giving is being dismantled. This institution, which is the extended family is being disintegrated (Oluwabamide 2007; John 2010). Consequently, the ageing population is now facing a number of problems. These problems have brought some challenges to older people, which are being examined in this paper. Factors that brought about these challenges are identified while suggestions on how they could be tackled are given. The opportunities available to older people in Africa are also discussed.

DEFINING OLD AGE

There is no generally accepted definition of older persons. This is because there is no universally accepted criterion for defining certain categories of people as old (Oluwabamide 2005). Therefore, the categorization of people as old is quite arbitrary.

Old age today has a legal definition, in the sense that it refers to the age at which most people retire from work, and claims for particular kinds of welfare benefit such as pensions can be made (Gidens 1990). In Africa, formal retirement age ranges from 55 to 65

years (Help Age International 2001). The United Nations defines older persons as those aged 60 years and above. However, sometimes older persons are categorized. According to Wikipedia (2011), divisions are made between the young old (65-74 years), the middle old (75-84 years) and the oldest (85 years and above).

PERIOD OF NO CHALLENGES

Until recently, older people in African societies faced little or no challenges. This was because what today constitute challenges did not exist in the past. Thus, prior to contact with or evolution of factors that brought about social and cultural change, African cultures did create conditions of comfort, adequate care and respect for the elderly. According to Helpage International (2001), the care of older people within their families in Africa was guaranteed until the intervention of colonial rule, modernization, urbanization and industrialization.

Studies (Abdulrahman 1988; Ogunbodede 1997; HelpAge International 2001; Oluwabamide 2005) have shown that the extended family system practiced by most African societies has enhanced collective care for the aged. According to Oluwabamide (2005), the care of the aged posed no problem in African traditional societies. This is because the extended family system assigned this as a responsibility to the younger generation. Thus, in a typical African community, the elderly are catered for by members of their extended families and sometimes, the entire clan where necessary.

Furthermore, African cultures prescribed that the aged be respected by the younger members of the community. In most African societies, respect towards senior kinsmen and kinswomen was considered a virtue, which all and sundry must practice (Oluwabamide 2005). This involved politeness to senior kin members; listening to their opinions and observing their wishes.

In addition, in African societies older people were neither physically nor socially isolated (Ogunbodede 1997). In a typical African community, the younger members often sat down to chat with the elderly. This had a very positive effect on the welfare of the aged as they never suffered from loneliness or isolation and its psychological consequences.

Also, the society relied a great deal on the wisdom of the elderly, hence, the saying: "the words of elders are words of wisdom". This had a positive

impact on the aged especially when one considers the fact that the society's dependence upon their wisdom and experience encourages them (the aged) to actively participate in the affairs of their communities. They indeed, felt recognized and relevant.

FACTORS IN THE EVOLUTION OF CHALLENGES

Older people in African societies have, in recent times, been facing a great deal of challenges, which have affected their perception of ageing. These are challenges which emanated from modernization and other agents of change. According to HelpAge International (2001), the traditions and values that used to ensure the protection of older people in Africa are under pressure due to social and economic changes. Thus, Oluwabamide (2005: 67) observes:

Over the years, the impact of modernization, industrialization and the accompanying strong western influence have brought about changes in the structure of African society. Thus, recent breed of Africans know more of European ways of life than their own indigenous culture — Consequently, modernization has brought about change in attitudes toward the aged in African society

The above implies that good as modernization, industrialization and even globalization may be in terms of the development of human society, they have created some negative impacts on the elderly in African societies. This has, in the long run, created some difficult conditions for the aged which have become great challenges to them.

At this juncture, it is necessary to examine the impact of modernization on the cultural roles and privileges of the aged in African societies.

- (1) The access to knowledge through formal education has led to a reduction in the power and prestige given to the accumulated wisdom of the aged. Thus, their knowledge and experience are seen as not being directly relevant to the problems of the "modern age". This according to Oluwabamide (2005), has informed the relegation of traditional institutions in government in Nigeria today.
- (2) The direct linkage of educational attainment with occupation and income has altered the economic status of the aged markedly.
- (3) The geographical mobility often necessitated by the search for white collar jobs has resulted in the factionalization of the extended family system and the increasing isolation of the aged.

- (4) The interdependence that used to be the hallmark of the extended family in African societies is gradually being replaced by emphasis on the autonomy and independence of the nuclear family consisting of a man, his wife or wives and their children. Usually, within the extended family structure, the aged were given a pride of place and adequately catered for by other members of the family. But with the recent emphasis on the nuclear family, the aged are being gradually ignored.
- (5) The mutual obligations of the extended family are being systematically eroded by the increasing emphasis on material success and individualism. Consequently, a well-to-do younger adult who lives far away from home think less of taking care of the elderly members of the extended family, who are not directly his parents.

THE IMPLICATIONS

The factors discussed above have certain implications not only on the aged but also on the general attitude of the people to them (the aged). They include the following:

- (1) Children's or youths' engagement in work activity far away from their ancestral homes has led to the isolation of the aged and the attendant health problems often wrongly attributed to the ageing process. In the past, when there was no cause for the youths to seek for white collar jobs outside the vicinity of their ancestral communities, they lived very close to their parents and took care of them in old age.
- (2) The neglect or at least, the reduced respect accorded the wisdom and experience of the aged is increasingly cutting them off from participation in important interests and activities of the society. This has resulted in their loss of a sense of significant membership of the society. Because the advices of the elderly are no longer appreciated, they are not encouraged to participate in decisions that affect the community.
- (3) Increasingly, people are beginning to see old age as an age of increasing tension and insecurity. As society tends to forget or to discount the contributions of its past heroes, so also people are becoming jittery about the prospects of growing old (Abdurahman 1988). Because in recent times, the aged are being denigrated, they are now feeling dejected.

Consequently, as people grow old they begin to feel unhappy.

THE CHALLENGES

The aged in African societies are now facing quite a number of challenges which are the consequences of the factors discussed above. Some of the challenges require urgent attention. What are these challenges?

HelpAge International (2001:1) observes:

... Today, they (older people) are subjected to various forms of abuse that include physical violence, rape, and denial of basic necessities (food, water, shelter and healthcare). They are also denied support by their families and communities. At the national level, older people are denied the opportunity to participate in issues that affect them and they are not adequately considered in national legislation. Although, they are among the poorest of the poor, poverty alleviation programmes do not target them.

The above statement made by HelpAge International summarizes the challenges facing the aged in contemporary African societies. It is necessary at this juncture to discuss these challenges.

1. Food and Nutrition

Most old people in contemporary African societies suffer from malnutrition. Hence, a major challenge for them is how to get adequate food to eat. It is pertinent to note however, that malnutrition is one of the factors that contribute to poor health of older people (HelpAge International 2001). Thus, malnutrition among the aged brings with it, risks of increased mortality and morbidity. In fact, it has been observed that there is a high level of malnutrition among older people even in relatively food secure areas (Ochola 2000). It should be noted that this problem is a fall out from the disintegration of the extended family system, a factor which now denies the aged the age-long communal care.

2. Unemployment and Income Insecurity

Studies have shown that older people are usually the poorest in every society (HelpAge International 2001). This is particularly so in African societies. Generally, the aged do not have access to a regular income and majority do not benefit from any social security provision. Older people are discriminated against and denied employment

opportunities once they reach retirement age and after retirement (International Social Security Association 1999). In addition, older people are forced to retire to create room for younger people. Furthermore, in most African countries, the few available formal social security systems are restricted. They cover only a small percentage of the population (The World Bank 1994).

3. Health

Health has been regarded as a priority issue to older people throughout Africa (HelpAge International 2001). Though studies have shown that life expectancy has increased a great deal but this is only good in a situation of good health (Oluwabamide 2009).

Thus, WHO (1998) cited in Ageing in Africa (2004:4) notes:

Over the past 50 years, life expectancy has greatly increased. But to live longer in bad health, disability with dependence on others is "an empty prize."

The leading causes of death and disability among the ageing population include chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disorders, osteoporosis and osteo-arthritis, cancer, depression and other mental health disorders, diabetes, malnutrition, kidney failure, blindness, etc. (Ageing in Africa 2004:4). Other diseases such as urinary tract infection, tuberculosis, pneumonia, scabies and body lice (the latter two due to poor personal hygiene) are also common among older people.

Poor health means withdrawal of older people from productive activity and may render them dependent and disabled (HelpAge International 2001). At the individual level, the capacity to earn a living or participate in family and community life, as well as a sense of personal well-being are all governed by health status (HelpAge International 1999).

In most African communities, lack of income in the family makes older people's health problems to be addressed only after other family priorities. This is compounded by the absence of government systems allowing older people to access free medical services. There is also the problem of negative attitudes of health personnel which discourage older people from visiting health centres (Oluwabamide 2009).

4. Poverty

Majority of the aged in contemporary African societies are poor (Oluwabamide 2005). In fact ILO

(1997) cited in HelpAge International (2001:9) states that in the majority of countries worldwide, but particularly in the developing countries, older people are typically the poorest members of society and live below the poverty line. HelpAge International (2001:9) observes:

Whilst the cycle of poverty is hard to break for anyone, the challenges are even greater for older people as society ignores their needs and fails to recognize their potential, so making it harder for them to change their situation.

In African countries, many people enter their older years with limited assets and these are quickly exhausted as earnings reduce. However, low incomes make it hard for people to save for their older years. Furthermore, families which are often seen as the main social security system in Africa are finding it harder to cope due to increasing poverty.

The implications of poverty for the aged are quite obvious. Poverty means that older people in Africa are coping with poor health, lack of basic education, the impact of HIV/AIDS and much more. Also, lack of income security makes older people vulnerable and open to abuse.

5. Isolation/Loneliness

In recent times, in African societies, the aged are being isolated. Most of them are left alone without anyone to socialize with them. In most rural communities, the occupants are predominantly the aged (Oluwabamide 2005). This is because most of the youths have migrated to the urban centers in search of education and white collar jobs. In these rural communities, one finds a situation whereby an aged resides alone in one room unable to go out because of certain ailment and nobody visits him there. This can complicate his/her ill-health condition and result in death which could have been averted.

Similarly, in some urban centers, the aged are abandoned to the extent that they have to manage to find their ways to the streets as destitutes. On the streets of such urban centers, there are older people who engaged in begging.

6. Loss of Respect

In this era of modernity, the elderly are no longer respected. This is a clear departure from what it used to be. In the past, the aged were often respected. Usually, children and younger adults reverence the older people. This was indeed a norm.

In the urban centers, there is no longer regard for the aged. At public places, one observes the feeble aged standing while the younger ones sit down watching them. The African culture prescribes that the younger person stands up and invites the elderly to sit.

7. Witchcraft Accusations

In some rural communities, older people are often accused of witchcraft. The younger members of such communities often call the older people witches and wizards. This is one of the factors that made them to withdraw from other members of the community. Sometimes they are afraid.

8. Housing and Living Environments

Because of such factors as unemployment and poverty, older people cannot afford good and durable shelter for themselves. Older people who live in the urban centers lack the resources with which to build or rent good accommodations, which are generally costly. It is quite obvious, therefore, that the aged have no access to safe, durable and affordable shelter.

9. Crises, Emergencies and Epidemics

Older people in African countries suffer a great deal during emergencies. This is because in such situations, they are neglected while the younger people are given the pride of place. Assistance is always directed to the younger members of the community during emergencies such as periods of crises and war.

Similarly, during epidemics actions taken to tackle them often exempt the aged. Focus is often on the younger people. A case in point is the deadly disease HIV/AIDS. It has been noted that most programmes on HIV/AIDS assume that older people are not sexually active, thus denying them HIV/AIDS education and putting them at risk (Oluwabamide and Akpan 2006).

MEETING THE CHALLENGES FACING THE ELDERLY IN AFRICA

In this section, a number of suggestions are made on how older people can meet some of the challenges earlier discussed.

1. The society should stop discriminating against the aged in employment.
2. The government should include social security systems to cover those older people that have been unlucky not to get employed.
3. The society should change the prevailing negative attitudes, which discourage older people from accessing health services.
4. The government should design health services that take into account the physical condition of older people.
5. The government should include older people in the process of designing poverty alleviation programmes for its country so that their interest can be adequately taken care of.
6. The society should explore effective means of supporting family structures.
7. The government should embark on enlightenment campaign to discourage people from isolating the older people. Such enlightenment should also seek to discourage bad behaviours toward the aged. The people should be encouraged to respect the aged and be discouraged from calling them witches and wizards.
8. The government should subsidize food bought by or for poor older people. Better still, the government can create a food bank for poor older people. Here, they can go and collect free food items. Thus, it would be government's responsibility to feed them.

CONCLUSION

Older people are no doubt part of every human society. But it is most unfortunate that in most African countries, the interests and needs of other population groups are catered for by numerous policies and legislations whereas older people are ignored. Yet the population of older people worldwide is increasing dramatically. Ignoring the older people therefore, amounts to an infringement of their fundamental human rights.

If there is any time when issues relating to the welfare of older people should be given serious attention, it is now. This is because those traditions and values that used to ensure the protection of older people in Africa are under serious pressure, due to social and economic change. Family bonds have been weakened by the need to ensure survival in a cash economy, thus, impacting negatively on older people. Weakening of family support structures has increased the vulnerability of older people. More importantly, pressure from different

quarters has led to change in the family structure affecting family composition and functions.

Consequently, today the older persons are subjected to various forms of abuse. They are also denied support by their families and communities. At the national level, older people are denied opportunity to participate in issues that affect them and they are not adequately considered in national legislation. There is, therefore, the urgent need to begin to take cognizance of the older persons. They should be empowered to advocate for their rights and promote the development of appropriate policies that would address their issues.

Based on the above discussions it is hereby recommended as follows: Firstly, the Parliament or law makers in different African countries should make legislations that would make it mandatory for their governments to pay certain amount of money for older persons monthly, for their upkeep. Secondly, African governments should make health care free for older persons in all public hospitals. Drugs should be administered on them free. Similarly, laboratory tests should be conducted on them without charges. Thirdly, African governments should, in partnership with the private sector, establish homes for the elderly in all the rural communities in their respective countries. Lastly, retirees who are still strong enough to work and are eager to do so should be provided with light jobs.

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