



SUPPORTING THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF THE INCREASING SENIOR POPULATION

According to the UN's World Population Ageing Report 2013, there are currently more than 800 million elderly people in the world. This number has quadrupled in the last 50 years and is expected to reach two billion by 2050. While this is partly great news that is evidence of the rise in life expectancy the entire world is experiencing, it also brings with it many concerns. Health expenditures for people over 60 have gone through the roof and no developed country is ready to face the huge increase of healthcare spending – USA, for example, already devotes approximately 18 percent of its budget to public health.

A part of finding a solution to this issue is increasing the productivity and participation of seniors. This can contribute majorly to the quality of life of seniors as well as benefit society. The experience of older people is very valuable and they should not be isolated from other age groups. The increasing retirement age, however, must be accompanied by other measures that will help seniors feel like an important group of citizens.

Population Aging

Now, for the first time in history, the amount of people over 65 years has reached the same number as the amount of children under five years and it is still growing. The amount of the oldest of the old is growing rapidly, in fact, people over 85 years are the fastest-growing age group in many countries worldwide. This means that soon, it will be impossible to sustain the current support systems for senior citizens of many countries

worldwide. While it is not certain how large the population of young people will be in 2050, it is quite certain that the senior population will reach two billion people. This is because of a very simple difference between the youth and senior population of 2050 - it is hard to predict the size of the youth population, because it is hard to predict the fertility rates in the future. In contrast with the members of the youth population, all of the people that will be seniors by that time have already been born and mortality rates are much easier to predict than fertility rates.

Effect on healthcare expenses

Current systems in most of MEDCs are designed for the working population to take care of the living expenses and especially the healthcare expenses of the whole senior population in a centralized system. In a society where overall life expectancy is growing, but the healthy life expectancy is more or less stagnating, this problem will grow more and more. Based on a report by the UK Committee on Science and Technology, in the United Kingdom in 1981, the life expectancy was seventy seven (77) years for women and seventy one (71) years for men. The healthy life expectancy was sixty seven (67) years for women and sixty five (65) years for men. That means that there were ten (10) years of constant healthcare expenses in the life of an average woman and six (6) years of constant healthcare expenses in the life of an average man. Twenty years later, in 2001, the life expectancy was eighty one (81) years for women and seventy six (76) years for men. The healthy life expectancy was sixty nine (69) years for women and sixty seven (67) years for men. That means that there were twelve (12) years of constant healthcare expenses in the life of an average woman and nine (9) years of constant healthcare expenses in the life of an average man. This means that the number of years of constant healthcare expenses increased by two (2) years, or by one sixth of its value in 1981 for women and by three (3) years, or by one third of its value in 1981 for men. On average, that means that the number of years of constant healthcare expenses has

increased by one fourth or twenty five (25) per cent in the twenty years between 1981 and 2001. This brings us to the conclusion that if this opening of the scissors between overall life expectancy and healthy life expectancy keeps going on in the future, the current system will not be sustainable. On top of that, the United Kingdom is but an example.

What is Social Participation?

To be able to participate in a society, the social inclusion of the group of people is necessary. There is no exact definition of social inclusion, but it can be characterized as the opposite process to social exclusion, which occurs when a certain group of people is excluded (voluntarily or involuntarily) from economic, social, political and cultural life, employment or receiving an education. Exclusion can result in financial pressure, stress, poor housing, high crime rates, poor health or the disintegration of family structures. Social inclusion therefore is the process of trying to fight social exclusion. Social inclusion can be not only trying to remove the barriers preventing the group to move to the center of society, but also tries to make society itself more accepting and ensure that anyone can participate. The Laidlaw Foundation, a Canadian social justice agency, believes there are five key parts to social inclusion. These are valued recognition, human development, involvement and engagement, proximity and material well-being.

Social inclusion of the senior population

While the Laidlaw Foundation focuses on youth, the same can be applied to the elderly. A society must fulfill the following in order to be accepting and inclusive towards the senior population: having respect and understanding (valued recognition), making sure they have the means to grow old with dignity (human development), making sure they can make decisions about their health, housing, lifestyle and other things by themselves and are supported (involvement and engagement), avoid isolation that could possibly lead to marginalization and depression

(proximity) and financially supporting them at a time when they can no longer earn money by themselves.

Most countries have already implemented some anti-exclusion laws, laws trying to prevent the process of exclusion of any group of people, but not many have implemented inclusion laws, laws actively trying to include excluded people into society, and those are even less focused on the senior population (most of the programs are youth, family and equality orientated).

Poverty of the senior population can be a big issue, especially in developing and less developed countries. While in most developed countries the elderly receive some sort of basic financial support without having to have contributed to the system previously, this is a rarity in less developed countries. One of the possible solutions to the problematic situation of elderly people in such countries could be the introduction of a unilateral base for financial support.

Population shift in less developed regions

While the population shift causing the great increase in senior population has already come in most of the world's more developed regions, it is expected to come in the very near future to the less developed regions, if the current trends in the transformation of fertility rates continue and the "population revolution" as we know it from the evolution of more economically developed regions during the 19th and 20th centuries takes place in these less developed regions as well. Thirty years ago, only five percent of the Chinese population was over 65 years old. Today, it's ten per cent and it is expected to reach twenty five percent in 2050. China's pensions reserve accounts for only approximately two percent of China's GDP, compared to fifteen percent in the United States and twenty five percent in Japan. China's need to invest in health care, pensions and social security systems might strongly affect its spending in other areas, such as the military, and its aging population might strongly transform its competitiveness in labor-intensive industries, because an

aging population would mean the price of labor will grow. But while China and other recently industrialized countries can still afford a welfare system assisting the senior populations, many less economically developed countries cannot, which means that future senior populations of less developed regions are at great risk of extreme poverty. In 2000, the percentage of people over 65 years in Africa was 3.3 percent, but it is expected to reach ten percent by 2050, in other words, it is expected to be more than tripled. Most of African governments are not prepared for such a change and pensions, welfare or social security systems are either on an extremely low level or even non-existent. A high mortality rate in the working age population is greatly contributed to by insufficient healthcare systems that cause over fifty percent of African orphans to live with their grandparents, according to UNICEF. They are another economic burden for the seniors in an already bad situation.

Sources and Further Reading:

- <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2013.pdf>
- <http://www.ifa-fiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/SOM-Country-Report-Final.pdf>
- <http://www.nia.nih.gov/sites/default/files/WPAM.pdf>
- <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldsctech/20/2004.htm>