

Older women: accelerating progress towards the MDGs

20th Annual Celebration of the International Day of Older persons
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I would like to start by taking you back to the Millennium Declaration on which all the MDGs are all based. It pledged "to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease" and "to implement the Convention on the Elimination All Forms of Discrimination Against Women".

Human rights and non-discrimination were underpinning principles of the Millennium Declaration. In it States resolved to "strive for the full protection and promotion in all our countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all".

However, these fundamental principles of gender equality and non-discrimination are only partly reflected in the Millennium Development goals, targets and indicators themselves.

We can see this in the goal on gender equality, Goal 3, which was reduced to one target on eliminating gender disparity in education.

And in terms of non-discrimination, the MDGs do not require States to identify and reach the most marginalised, including older women, and work to eliminate discrimination and exclusion.

These shortcomings have had a profound impact on development responses over the last 10 years. Policies, programmes and resources have focussed on meeting a set of goals which have only a very limited focus on gender equality and completely ignore demographic ageing. Data monitoring progress has not been disaggregated by age, sex or other factors such as disability or ethnic origin, and, as a result discrimination remains invisible.

What this has meant is that development interventions and poverty reduction strategies generally ignore older women who continue to face discrimination, violence and abuse because they are old and because they are women and who, after a lifetime of gender inequality, are some of the poorest and most marginalised in society. Older women have the lowest literacy rates, live more years in ill health but have less access to social security schemes than older men and can face discrimination in property and inheritance laws and practice.

Despite this, the contribution that older women make to development and accelerating progress towards the MDGs is absolutely critical.

Take MDG 1 on poverty, hunger and decent work.

Older women play a key role in reducing the poverty and hunger of their families and households in which they live.

We often forget that many older women, as many as 80% in some of the least developed countries, are in the labour force, often in informal, insecure and poorly paid jobs but, nevertheless, making a significant contribution to the income of their households.

In fact the number of older women in the work force increased in all regions between 2006 and 2009. Whether this is through choice or necessity, we do not know but the income they bring in is critical to reducing their own and their families' poverty.

And when older women's rights are realised and their efforts supported, this contribution is greatly enhanced.

For example, when older women receive a pension, they often spend it on food, thereby reducing hunger and improving nutrition. In South Africa, for example, research has shown that girls living in a household with an older woman receiving a pension were 3 – 4 centimetres taller than girls living in a household without a pension.

We also know that older women play a vital role in ensuring that young children in their care, particularly girls, get a primary education – thereby contributing to both MDGs 2 and 3. Again research in South Africa has shown that amongst the poorest 25 per cent of all households, girls who live in households which receive a non-contributory pension are 7 per cent more likely to be enrolled full time in school than girls living in households without a pension.¹

Older women also have a critical role to play in progress towards MDG 6, the MDG on combating HIV and AIDS and other diseases, both as carers of people living with HIV and AIDS and of young children affected by HIV and AIDS.

In a recent study in Tanzania HelpAge found that 88% of older people caring for grandchildren were widows. And in a similar study in Ethiopia two thirds were widows². A WHO study in Zimbabwe in 2002 found 71% of older people caring for children affected by HIV were women. Supporting older women in their caregiving roles is essential to accelerating progress on the MDG 6 on combating HIV as well as the MDGs on education, child mortality and hunger.

The question is, with only five years to go and so much to do, how best to do this. I would like to suggest some immediate actions that need to be taken.

The outcome document adopted by the General Assembly at the MDG Summit last month pays scant attention to older women or men, with only one reference to older people in terms of meeting their nutritional needs (70 v).

Whilst this is deeply disappointing, the outcome document does, however, include policy actions that, if implemented at the national level, would not only reduce older women's poverty but also support the contributions that they make to their families and communities.

Central to this is the commitment in the outcome document to "promoting comprehensive systems of social protection ... by establishing a minimum level of social security and health care for all" (70 g)

¹ Samson M et al, 'The Social and Economic Impact of South Africa's Social Security System', EPRI Research Paper Number 37, 2004, p73

² Susan Erb, One Size does not fit all, July 2010, unpublished

We have seen how important a pension is to older women and their families. Non-contributory pensions are an affordable, gender sensitive way to reach poor people and should be considered as one of the critical components in such a comprehensive system of social protection.

The second action is around disaggregating data.

The MDG outcome document also committed to "better generation and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data" (72 h). To deliver on this the UN MDG database must immediately start collecting age- and sex-disaggregated data not only to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of the existing MDGs but also to provide the evidence base for a more equitable and rights-based post-2015 poverty reduction framework.

But the MDGs should not be considered in isolation.

We must also take advantage of the timely creation this year of UN Women, and ensure that, from the outset, it takes a lifecourse approach in its work on gender equality and empowerment of women. Explicit attention needs to be given to older women and ageing in this new body's work.

In addition, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women must be fully implemented and we hope that a new general recommendation on older women's rights will be adopted later this month in Geneva, providing guidance on exactly how to do this.

And we must also encourage our governments to engage in and support discussions here at the UN in New York on the feasibility of a new human rights convention to better protect older people's rights.

[Note: the General recommendation was adopted on 19 October 2010.]

However we must also look ahead, to beyond the MDGs. Because of the recent Summit, everyone has naturally been focusing on what needs to be done between now and 2015 but we must also make sure that older women, and men, are central to the post MDG debate. We must make sure that any new poverty reduction framework for beyond 2015 responds to the impact of ageing on development and addresses the multiple forms of discrimination that poor people experience, including age and gender based discrimination. We cannot allow international development processes to ignore ageing any longer and it is our responsibility to make sure that they do not.

But none of this can happen without the direct involvement of older women themselves.

Last Friday on the International Day of Older Persons (October 1st), older women and men in 50 countries took to the streets, met with their Presidents and held other events as part of the Age Demands Action campaign.

Among them were 700 hundred older women and men in Haiti. I would like to end with this photo of them singing in a church before they marched to the Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti, where they demanded increased support for the children orphaned by the earthquake, many of whom are now being looked after by the older women themselves.

Thank you.