

An Open Letter to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

September 9th, 2010

Mr. Ban Ki-moon
Secretary-General
United Nations
New York, NY 10017

Dear Secretary-General,

We look forward to your address marking the 20th Anniversary of the United Nations International Day of Older Persons (October 1, 2010) which this year focuses on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

There is no doubt that the MDGs have been influential in galvanising international support and providing momentum to tackle poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. However, as a group of NGOs in Consultative Status with the UN working on strengthening older women and men's rights globally, we are concerned about the continued exclusion of older women and men in the MDGs and the lack of recognition of, and support to, the critical contribution that they make towards their achievement.

Older people remain invisible in efforts to achieve the MDGs

You recognized in the MDG Global Report 2010 that 'it is clear that improvements in the lives of the poor have been unacceptably slow'¹. Poverty affects whole households and is transmitted across generations. Old age can be a period of extreme vulnerability to poverty, ill health and social exclusion. It has been estimated that currently less than 20% of older people in the world are covered by pensions² which suggests that as many as 607 million people aged 60 and above lack income security. Furthermore research found that in 11 out of 15 low-income sub-Saharan African countries the incidence of poverty among households with older people is on average 15% higher than the national average which highlights the risks of intergenerational poverty traps³.

Despite this, older people are not explicitly mentioned in any of the MDG targets or indicators to measure their progress.

As a result most development policies and programmes focus their efforts on children, young people and the working age poor, lacking any understanding of the critical social, economic and caring contributions of older people. Even though the UN Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) recommended that older people be included in policies and programmes to achieve the poverty reduction target in MDG1, there is scant acknowledgement of and action to address unprecedented demographic ageing which now means that 66% of the world's older people live in low and middle-income countries, with this set to rise to 80% by 2050⁴.

¹ UN. 2010. Millennium Development Goals Global Report 2010. p3.

² Forteza A et al., 2009. Measuring the coverage gap in Holzmann, R et al. (eds). Closing the coverage gap; the role of social pensions and other retirement income transfers. World Bank

³ Kakwani, N., & Subbarao, K., 2007. Poverty among the Elderly in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Role of Social Pensions. Journal of Development Studies, Vol. 43, No. 6, 987-1008.

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, *World population ageing 2009, 2009*, p.10 and 13, www.un.org/esa/population/publications/WPA2009/ WPA2009_WorkingPaper.pdf (28 January 2010)

The contribution of older women and men is critical to the accelerating progress on the MDGs

The contribution that older women and men make to society is invaluable. Many poor older people continue to work well past usual retirement ages to support themselves and their families. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, 80% of men and 70% of women over 60 work for a living⁵. Older people are also central to the response to HIV and AIDS: in seven sub-Saharan African countries up to 40% of people living with HIV were being cared for by older people⁶ and in Tanzania and Zimbabwe as many as 40-60% of orphaned children are cared for by their grandparents⁷.

When older people's rights are respected and their efforts supported, the contribution they make is even greater and significantly contributes to achieving the MDGs.

For example, providing older women and men with a non-contributory pension in Lesotho has improved household food security by increasing food consumption, stabilizing access to food, and improving food diversity⁸ (MDG 1), has led to an increase in rural school enrolment ratios in Bolivia (MDG 2)⁹ and improved child health, particularly with girls. In South Africa, girls living in a household with an older woman receiving a pension were 3-4 centimetres taller than those in households without a pension (MDGs 3 & 4)¹⁰.

Accelerating progress towards the MDGs

In order for progress towards the MDGs to be accelerated we, therefore, urge you to support the following:

- The explicit recognition in the High-level Plenary Meeting in September 2010 in New York and in your address on the International Day of Older People of the critical role which older women and men play in accelerating progress towards the MDGs.
- The adoption of a more inclusive, rights-based approach to ensure all those living in chronic poverty, including older women and men, be reached.
- The inclusion of age disaggregated data in the UN MDG database to ensure the effective monitoring and evaluation of the MDGs for all age groups.

Signed

AARP Age UK
Global Action on Aging (GAA)
HelpAge International
International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG)
International Longevity Center UK
International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA)
International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing (IAHSA)
International Federation on Ageing (IFA)

⁵ UNDESA, *Population Ageing and Development Chart*, UNDESA 2009, <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ageing/ageing2009.htm>

⁶ HAI (2006) cited in HelpAge International 2008. Mind the Gap. HIV and AIDS and Older People in Africa.

⁷ UNICEF 2007 cited in HelpAge International 2008. (see above)

⁸ Kukrety, N. 2007. Investing in the Future. Save the Children UK position paper on the role of cash transfers in reducing child malnutrition.

⁹ Martinez (2005) cited in Palacios, R., and Sluchynsky O., 2006. Social pensions Part I: Their role in the overall pension system. World Bank.

¹⁰ Case (2001) cited in Barrientos and Lloyd Sherlock. 2002.