

# **The future of development is ageing**

*by*

Ken Bluestone,

Political and Policy Advisor for Age International

**T**wo themes that resonate strongly across the OECD are the need to achieve sustainable development and the growing significance of population ageing. It is rare, however, that these two agendas are brought together to consider the importance of ageing for developing countries.

It is all the more surprising given that population ageing is a global phenomenon acutely affecting developing countries. The numbers speak for themselves: in 2014, there were 868 million people over the age of 60 in the world – 12% of the total population. By 2030, this will increase to 1.2 billion or 16% of the population; and looking ahead to 2050, current estimates suggest there will be 2.03 billion older people worldwide – 21% of the population. By 2047, there will be more adults over the age of 60 than children 16 and under for the first time in human history.

This is a reality for developing countries today. Some 62% of people aged 60 and over live in developing countries and this is expected to increase to 80% by 2050. What is more important is the pace of the change taking place in lower- and middle-income countries. The demographic landscape is changing radically in many parts of Asia and Latin America, offering little time for governments in these countries to adapt. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, given the trends of increased longevity and economic development, it should be fully expected that the ‘youth bulge’ will become an ‘older person bulge’ within a few short generations.

So what does this mean for efforts to tackle poverty, inequality and climate change? At its simplest, we need to be asking ourselves the question: does our understanding of development include older people? Not taking older people into account means excluding up to 20% of the world’s population. In this regard, the post-2015 sustainable development goal (SDG) agenda marks a turning point in recognising ageing and older people as part of the development process. The SDG negotiations have already made it clear that addressing the rights and needs of older people is integral to the ambition of “leave no one behind”.

At a deeper level, it forces us to reconsider basic assumptions of what it means to be productive in society and what the role of older

people is. All too often policy makers, planners and development practitioners assume that life takes place in three stages: childhood (dependency); adulthood (productivity); later life (dependency). This simplistic understanding could not be further from the truth and masks a huge diversity of economic activity and social interactions at all stages of life.

Hidden from view is the contribution grandparents who have pensions make to improving children's education and nutrition. There is no calculation that captures the economic value of an older nurse that provides healthcare services on a voluntary basis in her community, having already been identified as "retired" and "non-productive". There are no figures that adequately value care and support by and for people of all ages in lower- and middle-income countries.

In the context of achieving the SDG framework, the promise of a 'data revolution' and the commitments to disaggregating data by age offer some hope that this situation can change. But any analysis must capture data at all stages of a person's life. Without a better understanding of ageing and development, we risk investing in development and building programmes that do not know where poverty and inequality lie. Disaggregating data by age, gender and disability is not an expensive add-on to the SDG framework, but is the very bedrock upon which effective decisions can be made and must be invested in.

Another critical lesson that the 'leave no-one behind' agenda provides is that the essential building blocks for building sustainable, peaceful and equitable societies are the very individuals within those communities. Without a better understanding of ageing and development, we fail to capture adequately the potential of individuals of all ages and abilities within society. Living in better health longer allows older people to contribute more to building resilience in disaster-prone areas. Having access to finance can mean better income and nutrition for older farmers and their families. Getting appropriate healthcare for grandparents can mean children spending more time in education.

Ageing is a development fact. There should be no value judgement attached to this statement or to a person's chronological age, whether they are young or old. Older people are carers, teachers, farmers, athletes, market traders, labourers, professionals, and Nobel laureates. Older people can also be frail and living with chronic illness, dementia or disability. The important thing is that we do not keep ageing hidden from view. We also need to have the courage to challenge our preconceptions of what getting older means to enable policies to emerge that are fit for purpose for our rapidly ageing societies.

## Useful links

Original article: Bluestone, K. (27 April 2016), "The future of development is ageing", OECD Insights blog, <http://wp.me/p2v6oD-23K>.

Age International, *Facing the facts: the truth about ageing and development*, Age International, [www.ageinternational.org.uk/what-we-do/Policy-where-we-stand-/ageing-and-international-development](http://www.ageinternational.org.uk/what-we-do/Policy-where-we-stand-/ageing-and-international-development)

OECD work on inclusive societies and development:  
[www.oecd.org/development/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment](http://www.oecd.org/development/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment)

The Disaster Risk and Age Index from HelpAge ranks 190 countries based on the disaster risk faced by older people:  
[www.helpage.org/what-we-do/climate-change/disaster-risk-and-age-index](http://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/climate-change/disaster-risk-and-age-index)



**From:**

## **Debate the Issues: New Approaches to Economic Challenges**

**Access the complete publication at:**

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264264687-en>

### **Please cite this chapter as:**

Bluestone, Ken (2016), "The future of development is ageing", in Patrick Love (ed.), *Debate the Issues: New Approaches to Economic Challenges*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264264687-24-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to [rights@oecd.org](mailto:rights@oecd.org). Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com) or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at [contact@cfcopies.com](mailto:contact@cfcopies.com).