

# IMPROVING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN THE SOCIETY

BY

*PROF. OLAKUNLE ODUMOSU,*

*Nigerian Institute of Social And Economic Research (NISER), Ibadan*

## INTRODUCTION

The lengthening shadow of life of our elderly is fast becoming a major challenge for society. This challenge needs to be addressed on an emergency basis before it acquires unpleasant proportions. While most advanced countries have some kind of social security mechanism in place, including a number of private, for-profit initiatives; unfortunately the same is not true for most developing countries, including Nigeria. Those addressing this challenge have failed to appreciate its complex sociological, psychological and economic dimensions that make it an extremely difficult one to handle. They have addressed the challenge so far as a one-dimensional sociological one leaving an enormous gap between expectation and delivery of service to the elderly. This gap can be leveraged to generate many interesting entrepreneurial opportunities.

### Defining Old

Most developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of 'elderly' or older person, but like many westernized concepts, this does not adapt well to the situation in Africa. While this definition is somewhat arbitrary, it is many times associated with the age at which one can begin to receive pension benefits. At the moment, there is no United Nations standard numerical criterion, but the UN agreed cutoff is 60 + years to refer to the older population.

Although, there are commonly used definitions of old age, there is no general agreement on the age at which a person becomes old. The common use of a calendar age to mark the threshold of old age assumes equivalence with biological age, yet at the same time, it is generally accepted that these two are not necessarily synonymous.

"The ageing process is of course a biological reality which has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. However, it is also subject to the constructions by which each society makes sense of old age. In the developed world, chronological time plays a paramount role. The age of 60 or 65, roughly equivalent to retirement ages in most developed countries, is said to be the beginning of old age. In many parts of the developing world, chronological time! has little or no importance in the meaning of old age. Other socially constructed meanings of age are more significant such as the roles assigned to older people; in some cases it is the loss of roles accompanying physical decline which is significant in defining old age. Thus, in contrast to the chronological milestones which mark life stages in the developed world, old age in many developing countries is seen to begin at the point when active contribution is no longer possible." (Gorman, 2000).

### The Situation in Nigeria

In Nigeria, ageing is a sensitive and seriously regarded issue. The elderly members of our society are highly revered, respected and often held in great esteem. They are often seen as the custodians of knowledge due to their experience in life. Sociologically, they are seen as the organizers of the

society, and as people through whom intergenerational beliefs and traditions/customs are transferred to the younger generations-. The aged in traditional African societies enjoyed privileges that include seniority positions in clans and kinship groups because of their age (United Nations, 1994), In summary, they are the arbiters in the society in which they live.

Demographically, the categorization of people on the basis of ageing varies from one place to other. But for the purpose of this paper, people aged 65 years and above are considered. The major criterion considered for choosing age 65 years is that at this age, in Nigeria, one is expected to have retired from economic activities and been a dependant in line with the tradition of caring for the age by close relatives like wives and children, and by the extended family members through multi-generational living arrangements.

The findings of the 1991 population census in Nigeria indicate that there were close to 3 million aged people of 65, years and above in the country. This constitutes 3.37% of the total population of 88.9 million. Of these, more than 2 million people were in the rural areas while the remaining 0.8 million were in the urban centres. The population of the elderly is expected to increase in Nigeria because Nigeria is demographically a young nation There is also a steady decline in fertility at the national level with the southern part of Nigeria contributing significantly to the decline. Total Fertility Rate in 1991 was 5.89 (NPC, 1998) while the National Demographic and Health Survey of 2003 found the TFR to have fallen to 5.1 (NPC, 2004). The decline is expected to continue. There has also been some Improvement in the health sector thus decreasing the mortality 'rate across all the ages. Kinsella (2001) corroborates the increase thus '75% of the worlds net gain of elderly individuals, from July 1999 to July 2000 (615,000 people monthly), occurred in developing countries'. The United Nations report states, inter alia, that 'persons aged 60 years and over, who presently constitute about 5% of Africa's total population, will grow more rapidly than the other age groups to the extent that by 2050, their share of the total population will be 12% (U.N. 2000). The implication of this statement applies specially to Nigeria as Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and the tenth most populous in the world. The crux of the matter now is that of the aged people in Nigeria.

### **Dimension of the Challenge**

Our society has traditionally treated the care of the elderly as the responsibility of the younger generation. However, the rapid increase in the number of nuclear families, the growing urbanization and the global nature of employment opportunities are forcing a change in this implicit social contract. These changes are compelling many of our elderly to live alone, though it must be said that some of them have chosen to do so. Although the nature and magnitude may vary, their care is a major area of concern and a challenge to both the rich and the poor sections of our society.

The condition of the aged people in Nigeria is worrisome. Data from the (NPC, 1998) shows that more than 2 million people representing 72% of the aged population are in the rural areas. By world standards not all the urban centres in Nigeria have the amenities that standard urban centres should have. In the rural areas, the dwellers lack almost all the basic social and economic amenities. These amenities, which include good schools, motorable roads, medical centres, electricity, telephone service, etc are lacking in virtually all the rural areas. Besides, most of the rural dwellers are engaged in a monotonous economic practice; that is, agriculture. Interestingly, the aged are the people feeding the children, the young and all the able bodied people, yet their needs are not being adequately considered let alone being met.

In Nigeria literacy level is still low. The findings of the 1991 population census were that altogether, 82% of the literate populations were under age 35 years, and barely 6% were aged 50 years and above. The distribution of the literate people declines as age increases (NPC, 1995). The overall literacy rates (sexes combined) were about 48% for the rural population and 72% in the urban areas, while the rates for the female population (38% and 64% respectively) were below the national average.

Most of the elderly in Nigeria are experiencing a hard life coupled with the fact that they lack the basic education which could have given them some opportunity to free themselves from the shackles of poverty. One can imagine what it means to live in the rural areas without the basic needs of life including education. It is a pitiable experience! This lack of education affects the people's health greatly.

In Nigeria, the retirement age is 60 years for both males and females in the public service sector. But the majority of the people are still economically active well beyond this age. For example, in the rural areas, where literacy level is very low there is nothing like retirement age. People continue being.

These are very tasking there is no good medical arrangement for these people either by the government or the community. A country profile by the Congress Library, U.S.A. has this to say about the plight of IS no social security system. Less than one percent of the people older than 60 years received pensions... there is some evidence that traditional practice of caring for parents was beginning to erode under harsh conditions of scarcity in urban areas."

People in the public service sector continue to manipulate their ages so that they will, not attain the retirement age quickly. This is why some of them 'die in active service' The 'fear of the unknown' associated with a very bleak future has culminated in the entrenchment of corruption in the social and economic system of Nigeria. "Basically, problem we have with aged of the plight of the aged the fact that there no provision to take care of them in their old age. What we have is a programme or policy that takes care of people after their employment years. But it is not everybody that works in the formal sector, so that leaves quite a number of people un-catered for by the government which then has the excuse that the extended family should take care of the aged" (Abbah and Mabo, 2004).

As presented by the Nigeria National Population Commission in its monograph on the elderly, it was concluded that, in Nigeria, the rates of labour force participation rates than elderly females, a significant percentage of the latter continue to participate in the labour force well beyond due time. Most of the elderly who were in the labour force were in current employment, there was virtually no unemployment among the elderly. It is significant to note that in this country, the greatest contribution to agricultural production is by the elderly population. Only very few of the young were engaged in agriculture (NPC, 2004).

This reality, though harsh, represents the sad state of affairs facing our elderly, and is a possible signal of the shape of things to come. Some of the problems of the aged are being by some charity

organizations that have set up facilities for tending to them. Some of them have religious affiliations and run facilities for the benefit of members of their community while others are run by charitable trusts. While a few organizations operate at the national level, a significant number of such facilities are "old age home" entities located in various cities and towns. A survey by Akeredolu-Ale et al (2001) showed that majority of such facilities is in the South. In Lagos, a city of 20 million people, there are about five old people's homes. They provide just 37 places to strictly-destitute elderly.

Nationally, there are 13 homes serving Nigeria's population of 140 million. While the social developmental background of the organizers provides a service orientation to the functioning of such facilities, many of them lack efficiency and effectiveness in their operations for want of appropriately designed systems and practices. As a result, the level of satisfaction that is derived by the users is not always up to expectations. We are talking not only about minimum material comforts, but also opportunities to meet a number of socio-psychological needs.

It seems the government has not yet recognized the seriousness of this challenge. To start with, it has to study the status of the matter, and work out strategies to manage it. It may not be practical, and advisable for the government to get involved directly, but a number of policy initiatives can facilitate charitable organizations and entrepreneurs to offer high quality services.

### **Improving the Situation**

Caring of the elderly has always been taken for granted to be filial responsibility with little or no government support in Nigeria. However, social and economic changes currently occurring have put into doubt the continued viability of such traditional arrangements for the elderly.

Such changes like increased emphasis on smaller family units, migration to urban areas, more working wives, new life styles and changing values all have effects on the entire society, the youth inclusive and will to a large extent affect their overall relationship with the elderly now and in future.

As most people can expect to survive their own retirement age by a substantial number of years, the concept of 'preparation for retirement' should not continue to be conceived as a last-minute adaptation but be proposed as a lifelong consideration from adulthood onwards -- as much to the individual for his or her future benefit, as to policy makers, universities, schools, industrial work centres, the media and society at large. It should serve as a reminder that policies on ageing and for the elderly are an important society-wide concern and not solely a question of caring for a vulnerable minority. For this reason, this calls for a general policy of prevention.

It is imperative that, when considering the question of ageing, the situation of the elderly should not be considered separate from the overall socio-economic conditions prevailing in society. The elderly should be viewed as an integral part of the population. They should also be considered within the framework of population groups such as women, youth, the disabled, and migrant workers. The elderly must be considered an important and necessary element in the development process at all levels within a given society. Ageing is apparent in the working-age population long before the number of persons over 60 increases. It is essential to adapt the labour policy as a whole and technology and economic organizations to this situation. This consideration should be accompanied by recognition of the fact that for the elderly in general -- and particularly for those beyond a certain higher age (the 'old old') -- policies have to be considered and programmes

implemented in response to their specific needs and constraints. Sectoral interventions in such fields as -health and nutrition, housing, income security, and social, cultural and leisure activities are as necessary for the elderly as for other population groups, and should be provided for by each country or community according to the means available to it. It is recognized that the extent of the provision that can be made, and its timing, will be affected by prevailing economic circumstances.

Policies and action aimed at benefiting the ageing must afford opportunities for Older persons to satisfy the need for personal fulfillment, which can be defined its broader sense as satisfaction realized through the achievement of personal goals and aspirations, and the realization of potentialities. It is important that policies and programmes directed at the ageing promote opportunities for self-expression in a variety of roles challenging to themselves and contributory to family and community, continuing growth through formal and informal learning, self-expression in arts and crafts., participation in community organizations and organisations of older people, religious activities, recreation and travel, part-time work and participation in the political process as informed citizens.

A priority consideration for all countries is how to ensure that their vast humanitarian efforts in favour of the elderly do not result in the maintenance of a growing, relatively passive and disenchanted sector of the population. Policy makers and researchers, as well as mass media and the general public, may need a radical change of perspective in order to appreciate that the problem of ageing today is not just one of the providing protection and care, but of the involvement and participation of the elderly and the ageing. Eventually, the transition to a positive, active and developmentally oriented view of ageing may well result from action by elderly people themselves, through the sheer force of their growing numbers and influence. The collective consciousness of being elderly, as a socially unifying concept, can in that way become a positive factor. Since spiritual well-being is as important as material well-being, all policies, programmes and activities should be developed to support and strengthen the spiritual well-being of the ageing. Governments should guarantee the of religious practices and expression.

### **Health**

epidemiological studies suggest that successive cohorts of the elderly arriving at the same age have better levels of health, and it is expected that, as men and women live to increasing greater ages, major disabilities will largely be compressed into a narrow age range just prior to death. Care designed to alleviate the handicaps, re-educate remaining functions, relieve pain, maintain the lucidity, comfort and dignity of the affected and help them to re-orient their hopes and plans, particularly in the case of elderly, are just as important as curative treatment. The care of elderly persons should go beyond disease orientation and should involve their total well-being, taking into account the interdependence of the physical, mental, social, spiritual and environmental factors. Health care should therefore involve the health and social sectors and the family in improving the quality of life of order persons. Health efforts, in

particular primary health care as a strategy, should be directed at enabling the elderly to lead independent lives in their own family and community for as long as possible instead of being excluded and cut off from all activities, of society. There is no doubt that, with advancing age, pathological conditions increase in frequency. Furthermore, the living conditions of the elderly make them more prone to risk factors that might have adverse effects on their health (e.g. social isolation and accidents) -- factors that can be modified to a great extent. Research and practical experience have demonstrated that health maintenance in the elderly is possible and that diseases do not need to be essential components of ageing. Early diagnosis and appropriate treatment is required, as well as preventive measures, to reduce disabilities and diseases of the ageing. A proper balance between the role of institutions and that of the family in providing health care for the elderly -- based on recognition of the family and the immediate community as elements in a well-balanced system of care is important. Those who work with the elderly at home, or in institutions, should receive basic training for their tasks, with particular emphasis on participation of the elderly and their families, and collaboration between workers in health and welfare fields at various levels.

A fundamental principle in the care of the elderly should be to enable them to lead independent lives in the community for as long as possible. Efforts should be intensified to develop home care to provide high quality health and social services in the quantity necessary so that older persons are enabled to remain in their own communities and to live as independent as possible for appropriate to their needs at the least cost. |

### **Housing and Environment**

Adequate living accommodation and agreeable physical surroundings are necessary for the well-being of all people, and it is generally accepted that housing has a great influence on the quality of life of any age group in any country. Suitable housing is even more important to the elderly, whose abodes are the centre of virtually all of their activities. Adaptations to the home, the provision of practical domestic aids to daily living and appropriately designed household equipment can make it easier for those elderly people whose mobility is restricted or who are otherwise disabled to continue to live in their own homes. Housing for the elderly must be viewed as more than mere shelter. In

Addition to the physical, it has psychological and social significance, which should be taken into account. To release the aged from dependence on others national housing policies should pursue the following goals: (1) Helping the aged to continue to live in their own homes as long as possible, provision being made for restoration and development and where feasible and appropriate, the remodeling and improvement of homes and their adaptation to match the ability of the aged to and from them and use the facilities; (2) Planning and introducing -- under a housing policy that also provides for public financing and agreements with the private sector--housing for the aged of various types to suit the status and degree of self-sufficiency of the themselves, in accordance with local traditional and customs' (3) Evolve and apply special policies and measures, and make arrangements so as to allow the aged to move about and to protect them from traffic hazards.

The growing incidence of crime in some countries against the elderly victimizes not only those directly involved, but the many older persons who become afraid to leave their homes. Efforts should be directed to law enforcement agencies and the elderly to increase their awareness of the extent and impact of crime against older persons.

### **Family**

The family, regardless of its form or organization, is recognized as a fundamental unit of society. With increasing longevity, four- and five-generation families are becoming common throughout the world. The changes in the status of women, however, have reduced their traditional role as caretakers of old family members; it is necessary to enable the family as a whole, including its male members, to take over and share the burden of help in and by the family. Women are entering and remaining in the labour force for longer periods of time. Many who have completed their child-rearing roles become caught between the desire and need to work and earn income and the responsibility of caring for elderly parents or grandparents. As the family is recognized as a fundamental unit of society, efforts should be made to support, protect and strengthen it in agreement with each society's system of cultural values and in responding to the needs of its ageing members. Governments should promote social policies encouraging the maintenance of family solidarity among generations, with all members of the family participating. The family as a unit should also be stressed at all levels. Appropriate support from the wider community, available when and where it is needed, can make a crucial difference to the willingness and ability of families to continue to care for elderly relatives. Planning and provision of services take full account of the needs of those careers.

There is ample evidence of the high esteem in which older people are held in developing countries. Trends towards increasing industrialization and urbanization and greater mobility of the labour force indicate, however, that the traditional concept of the role of the elderly in the family is undergoing major change. Worldwide, the overall responsibility of the family to provide the traditional care and support needs of the ageing is diminishing. Ways to ensure continuity of the vital role of the family and the dignity, status and security of the ageing, taking into account all the internal and international events which might influence this status of security, are issues that deserve careful consideration and action by Governments and non-governmental organizations. Recognizing the predominance of older women, and the relatively greater numbers of widows than widowers throughout the world, particular consideration should be given to the special needs and roles of this group. Governments and non-governmental bodies should be encouraged to establish social services to support the whole family when there are elderly people at home and to implement measures especially for low-income families who wish to keep elderly people at home.

### **Social Welfare**

Social welfare services can be instruments of national policy and should have as their goal the maximizing of the social functioning of the ageing. They should be community based and provide a broad range of preventive, remedial and developmental services for the ageing, to enable them to lead as independent a life as possible in their own home and in their

community, remaining active and useful citizens. Social Welfare services should have as their goal the creation, promotion and maintenance of active and useful roles for the elderly for as long as possible in and for the community. In a situation where resources are scarce, there is a general lack of organized social welfare services, particularly in the rural areas. Although the role of Governments in providing such services is paramount, the contribution of non-governmental organizations is also of great importance.

In traditional societies, old people have always enjoyed a privileged position based on respect, consideration, status and authority. But this is starting to be upset under the influence of modern trends and that privileged position is now being questioned. It is therefore time to become aware of these changes and on that the basis to define national ageing policies that would avoid some of the problems concerning the elderly faced by some developed countries. Existing formal and informal organizations should consider the particular needs of the ageing and allow for them in their programmes and future planning. The important role that cooperatives can play in providing services