

rural livelihoods

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In this issue

Ageing rural populations A blessing or a curse?

Ways to improve
communication
to assist rural
development

Inheritance rights
and women
in rural China

Increasing
women's role in
food security
in Africa

HIV/AIDS in
rural Ethiopia

Including
farmers' opinions
in policy making

The increasing proportion of older people in the world is often seen as a success, the result of improving health conditions. However, older populations create new challenges, particularly in rural areas of developing countries. These can threaten efforts to promote development in rural areas and need to be addressed through appropriate policies.

Population ageing – the increase in the proportion of 'older people' (those aged 60 and over) – is happening across the globe, but occurring much faster in developing countries, most of which have inadequate resources to deal with age-related problems.

Population ageing is the outcome of lower fertility levels across the world (meaning the proportion of children is falling) and improving health conditions (meaning people live longer). Many fatal diseases affect young people more than old people, particularly HIV/AIDS, contributing to population ageing. The ageing process is occurring even faster in rural areas due to rural-urban migration, which sees young adults leaving to find work in cities and older people returning to rural areas when they retire.

Research from the Food and Agriculture Organization identifies problems associated with population ageing in rural areas:

- rural ageing places great burdens on scarce household resources and community services
- older people are often dependent on their families, as they have no income or pension
- older people are often in poor health after a life of working and suffer from high levels of stress and anxiety
- older people can be particularly vulnerable to poverty, unable to access services such as health care and incapable of using resources such as land and water independently
- there can be a change in the demographic structure of households, with increasing numbers of older people at the 'head' of the household.

In the absence of a young labour force, older people have to look after crops and livestock. In many cases, they are unable to work the

land effectively and cannot afford to hire labour. This can reduce the agricultural productivity of an area, leading to food insecurity and poor nutrition. Older people are discriminated against in terms of training and are often less well educated. They are also denied access rights to land, particularly older women.

Whilst population ageing needs to be addressed everywhere, very few developing countries have effective policies on ageing. Possible policy approaches include:

- enhancing traditional systems of family support for older people
- encouraging older people to continue working when able to do so
- supporting personal savings systems that can be used in old age
- developing public schemes to respond to older people's needs, such as pensions and health services.

Population ageing can also bring many opportunities. Older people have considerable knowledge and experience, particularly of traditional agricultural practices and medicines. They are important in caring for young people whose parents have moved to cities or have died. Policy makers must find ways to make the most of population ageing, as the ageing process is unlikely to slow down in the near future.

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www.fao.org/sd/dim_pe3/pe3_040401a1_en.htm



Ways to improve communication to assist rural development

Although agriculture is the main income source for many rural people, the challenge of reducing rural poverty extends beyond farming. In many countries, agricultural services are well established but non-agricultural services to rural communities are often lacking. This means that income-generating alternatives to agriculture – an important part of rural livelihoods – are not being supported.

Research from the University of Maryland, USA, suggests that support for information and knowledge-building systems, such as new technology and training, will strengthen non-agricultural livelihoods. For example, new technology can develop cost-effective communication services (such as computer networks with internet access and electronic mail systems, cellular phone systems, interactive radio systems, and on-demand printing services) that meet different needs. These systems could provide information to help rural people diversify their livelihoods and find non-agricultural pathways out of poverty.

- Many rural households rely on several

income-generating activities, including agriculture. Non-agricultural activities usually raise money to support farm activities. Information about jobs and managing household finances would support this.

- Some rural people, especially those who have experienced a major upheaval (such as drought), need external assistance to prevent their situation getting worse. These people need access to information about assistance programmes, community rights and other advice.
- Many people leave rural areas and send money home to support those left behind. Information about accessing work in other areas would be useful.
- A minority of people stay in rural areas but abandon agriculture and run small businesses instead. These people need information about micro-finance, credit or business management.

Rural communication networks are important in responding to the needs of people who pursue alternatives to agriculture. Knowledge and information systems for rural development could direct people to resources that provide information, training and other assistance. These information systems could take a number of forms:

- Communication experts and information communication technology (ICT) specialists should play a major role in developing rural knowledge and information systems. Appropriate ICT programmes should have interactive

features and mechanisms to adapt in response to feedback from users.

- Radio is the most appropriate ICT approach in many places.
- Local demands should determine the form of information systems in each place, not perceived rural problems.
- Systems will need 'upwards' and 'downwards' linkages to work effectively. They need to be well connected with their rural users, but also to government ministries, educational bodies and non-governmental organisations to ensure information is effectively communicated.
- Communication programmes will need money from rural users to ensure financial sustainability, as they are not a priority for public funding.

Whatever development approach rural people choose to improve their lifestyle and escape poverty, they will need information to adapt to changes in their livelihoods. Effective communication of new ideas, methods, and inputs will enhance productivity and improve competitiveness. It will also help rural people to start new activities.

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Men first: inheritance rights and women in rural China

Inheritance rights for women in rural China are often limited by traditional customs which give greater benefits to men. Although this is being challenged by new laws, there is a big gap between legislation and reality.

Research from University College Chester, UK, analyses the transfer of resources between generations within households and village communities in rural China. Women's access to family resources is limited by patriarchal inheritance systems, which favour male family members.

In many villages, there has recently been a marked diversification of rural livelihoods, a rapid growth of rural industry and a diversification of ownership structures. However, changing economic conditions caused by the ending of rural communes has reduced rural people's security. In the absence of state or collectively financed social security, needs that are met by social welfare services in China's cities are still perceived as the responsibility of individuals in rural areas.

In rural societies, the focus of women's lives is their husbands' families, due to the persistence of 'patrilocal marriage', in which a woman moves into her husband's village at marriage. Daughters leave their natal (birth) families, but sons remain. This means rural people continue to rely on sons for security and support in ill health or retirement.

Evidence from interviews with village women shows:

- Most women do not have the same inheritance rights as their brothers nor do they try to claim them.
- Many women still believe that a 'virtuous woman' should not assert her own interests in the home and should avoid household disputes through tolerance and unselfishness.
- Traditional beliefs are so strongly held that many women also have

Traditional beliefs are so strongly held that many village women have negative attitudes towards their daughters' inheritance rights

negative attitudes towards daughters' inheritance rights. This situation appears to be changing, however. Improved opportunities for women to have paid jobs, education and training have increased their confidence and bargaining power in the distribution of household resources. Young village women defend the legitimacy of 'uxorilocal' marriage, in which the husband lives with his wife's family. More married daughters now stay on in their natal households. The question of rural women's inheritance is now discussed more openly.

A lack of similar legal mechanisms for old-age security, combined with the persistence of patrilocal marriage, has reinforced the tradition of passing resources onto sons, the denial of daughters' inheritance rights and the need for families to provide security for the elderly. However, the traditional security of family structures is now under threat from rural industrialisation, population mobility and family planning laws.

The unfairness of the differences between traditional rights of men and women will only change with effective social policies that combat gender discrimination and exclusion. To protect older people and encourage stronger rights for women, Chinese authorities should:

- accept that the lack of a basic social security system has reinforced constraints on women's rights to inherit, their power in the family and society and their citizenship rights
- recognise that the state has an active role to play in extending rural social security programmes – to promote welfare for all, especially women
- challenge patriarchal practices in order to realise equal inheritance rights for men and women in rural China.

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Increasing women's role in food security in Africa

Women play a key role in food security throughout Africa, yet local customs and legal institutions often discriminate against women, denying them access to land, resources, education, health care and public services. Increasing the rights of women increases food productivity, but the gap between men and women still exists in many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Research from the International Food Policy Research Institute, USA, studies the needs of women in sub-Saharan Africa. In many countries, women do not have equal rights to men. In Lesotho and Swaziland, for example, women are considered 'legal minors' which means they cannot own property, enter into contracts or obtain bank loans without the involvement of a male relative. Policy reform is essential in several areas:

- Land: although women are responsible for providing food, their rights to land are restricted. Women can often only

acquire land through marriage and then lose it through divorce or widowhood.

- Water: women are primarily responsible for providing water for household needs and for agriculture and livestock purposes. They also maintain water quality and sanitation.
- Livestock: women can accumulate wealth from animals more easily than through land. Even without owning animals, women benefit if they are involved in the decision-making processes.
- Education and child care: reducing the costs of school (such as travel) and

increasing the benefits to a family of sending girls to school will encourage higher attendance.

- Technology: this can reduce the time spent on food production – vital for women with many other responsibilities, such as caring for themselves and sick relatives.
- Personal and family relationships: these provide support for women, strengthening their ability to work together and form cooperative groups.
- Health and nutrition: this is important for the quality of women's lives and their children. Significant times for health care include adolescence, pregnancy and when caring for children.

There is evidence that the situation for women is improving in many countries. In Uganda, the National Constitution requires that at least one third of office workers are women. The Matrimonial Regimes, Liberties and Succession Act in Rwanda allows women to own property. Programmes to reduce mother-to-child HIV infection in Zambia and Kenya enable women to make better decisions regarding contraception and infant feeding.

Further improvements and policy reforms are needed, however. The research identifies four areas for change:

- rewriting laws to end discrimination and ensuring that these are enforced
- reducing the gap between men and women by improving access to assets, such as land and water
- investing in education, health, child care and other services for women

case study

HIV/AIDS in rural Ethiopia

The spread and impacts of HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia are different between rural and urban areas. Although the number of people who have HIV/AIDS is estimated to be lower in rural areas, greater understanding is required to prevent the problem reaching the levels experienced in cities and towns.

The causes of HIV/AIDS transmission differ between rural and urban areas. The main risk in rural areas is people becoming involved with HIV-risky activities in urban areas (mostly unprotected sex with an infected person) and carrying the disease into rural communities. The potential loss of people in rural areas represents a huge threat to a country heavily dependent on the agricultural sector for food production and export earnings.

Several factors place rural communities at high risk of infection:

- people spending time away from rural areas for school, employment or seasonal migration
- young women meeting high-risk groups at local markets
- limited access to information, particularly in local languages, about HIV transmission, AIDS symptoms and methods of protection
- a lack of rural health services, including treatment for sexually transmitted infections, access to condoms, voluntary counselling and testing centres
- gender inequality: women and girls are disadvantaged with regard to safe sex due to discriminatory social and cultural practices
- silence and denial of the problem that arises from the problems associated with discussing sex.

Rural communities can help reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS. Changing to crops that are less labour demanding will reduce the impact on food production of young people dying. Increasing incomes through new forms of rural employment, such as bee keeping and blacksmithing, may reduce the need for travel to high-risk urban areas. The communication networks that exist in rural communities can increase knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS.

There is still an opportunity to tackle the problem in rural Ethiopia, which must not be missed. The huge impacts of HIV/AIDS in many parts of Africa could become even worse if efforts are not made to protect the agricultural community, on which the region is so dependent.

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'The challenge of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in rural Ethiopia: averting the crisis in low AIDS-impacted communities', Sustainable Development Department, FAO, 2004
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In many countries, women do not have equal rights to men. Local customs and legal institutions deny women access to land, resources, education, health care and public services

- prioritising women when allocating scarce resources.

For reforms to be successful, they must be sensitive to traditions, especially in countries with ancient cultures: education can help in this regard. It is also important that women work alongside men in decision-making. Reform will be slow, but initiating change gives an important signal of commitment to stronger and more equal rights for women.

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www.ifpri.org/pubs/ib/ib20.pdf

Including farmers' opinions in policy making

The opinions of poor rural people are important to many development processes. In many countries, donors and governments are establishing formalised procedures to enable opinions from many different people to be heard. Alongside these reforms, a range of farmer organisations have emerged, aiming to improve agricultural programmes and policies to respond more effectively to farmer concerns.

Research by Michigan State University, USA, reports on organisations representing farmer interests in Africa. Although each organisation works differently, they all aim to improve the delivery of services to farmers and consider their interests and concerns. These organisations are essential in making government practices more democratic.

In Senegal, the National Council for Rural Dialogue and Cooperation, a community-based support network, campaigns to the government and is part of the international movement defending farmer rights. In Mali and Togo, a representative farmer group called the Chamber of Agriculture provides ideas and information for national agricultural policies. In Uganda, thousands of farmer groups, known as the Farmers Fora, work with local governments on the delivery of agricultural extension services.

Each approach results in farmer opinions being heard at different levels of

government and each has experienced some success in influencing policy or service delivery. These achievements include active participation in agricultural policy debates at the World Trade Organization, reduced taxes on agricultural income and supplies and the provision of training for farmers.

There are still some problems with these organisations, however:

- All three models deliver previously unavailable services to farmers, but a lack of human resource and infrastructure limits the extent of their impact.
- Each model takes a different approach to membership. While this can include different members in response to specific issues, it is not a strong foundation for solid organisations.
- In Senegal and Mali, farmer organisations are recognised and accepted as the primary representative bodies for farmers. However, their policy agendas do not always represent the views of all their members.
- All three models depend on aid from donors. This represents a challenge to the groups becoming independently sustainable.

Agreements between donors, governments, non-governmental organisations and private sector organisations form an important part of each approach. However, more needs to be done to understand the contributions of these agreements. The research recommends:

- Farmer organisations need to work harder on communication. They need the capacity to access information about all farmers' concerns, as well opportunities for members to communicate across regions.

- Donors should explore ways to work more effectively with governments, in order to strengthen their commitment to these models.
- Donors should also help to build the infrastructure of farmer organisations.
- Governments, both local and national, must continue to provide clear opportunities for farmers and their representatives to participate in policy making.
- Increased financial contributions are needed from members of farmer organisations for them to become financially independent and sustainable. Governments and donors need to ask two major questions. Firstly, does the current emphasis on increasing farmer participation offer real opportunities for farmer groups to influence local or regional development policy? Secondly, how can the attitudes of middle and lower level public officials be changed to accept the demands from the public? It is only when these questions are answered that farmers will have a greater role in influencing government structures and practices.

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www.fao.org/sd/dim/in3/in3_040501_en.htm

useful websites

Livelihoods Connect
www.livelihoods.org

SD Dimensions, Food and Agriculture Organization
www.fao.org/sd

International Institute for Sustainable Development
www.iisd.org

Information and Communications Technologies
www.itcltd.com

Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty
www.migrationdrc.org

CARE International UK
www.careinternational.org.uk

Technology for sustainable livelihoods
www.livelihoodtechnology.org

Khanya - managing rural change
www.khanya-mrc.co.za

International Food Policy Research Institute
www.ifpri.org

Chronic Poverty Research Centre
www.chronicpoverty.org

Livelihoods and Poverty research group
www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/bcid/research/livelihoods_and_poverty

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