

A Neglected Ageing Population

The situation of the seniors in the Philippines and possible solutions

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1 Introduction

Today 50% of all seniors in the world live in low- and middle income societies this number is predicted to increase to 70% by 2050 (Jesmin, 2011). Through the history in Asia seniors has always been cared for by their families. In some countries like China and Philippines it has even been illegal to abandon the elderly family members who could no longer care for themselves. But in the current urbanizing Asia it has become harder and harder for low- and middle income families to take care of their elders resulting in an increase number of cases with senior abandonment.

The reason the population is getting older is due to lower rates of infant mortality, increased survival at older age and declining fertility rate (Dupoux, 2012). In almost all countries in the world the population aged 60 or over is growing faster than the total population. This is happening faster in developing countries and hand in hand with a rapid change in society creating a severe situation for many seniors around the world (Jesmin, 2011).

This essay will discuss the current situation for the seniors in the Philippines and make suggestions on how the situation could be improved by looking at what has been done around the globe.

2 Literature Review

2.1. Global Ageing

According to Jenkins poverty is not only due to the lack of income the term also includes vulnerability, prospects of earning a living, deprivation and exclusion, basic needs, social aspects and psychological aspects (Jenkins, et al., 2007). These aspects can all be related to the main issues HelpAge international has identified with the global senior situation in low income societies (Beales, 2010). Globally care of the older is falling on fewer children and the impact is felt the most by those with least resources. Historically in Asia care of elders has always fallen within the family, now with the rapid urbanization the family structure is changing. Traditionally in Asia family members can be sent to prison for abandoning or miscare of the seniors within the family. Today Philippines is the country with the largest export of workforce resulting in even fewer of the younger population to take care of their elders.

2.2 Interventions in the Philippines

In 2010 *Expanded Senior Citizens Act* was introduced in the Philippines. This act provides a social pension of Php 500 per month to seniors who are identified as 60 and over and “frail, sickly or with disability, and without pension or permanent source of income, compensation or financial assistance from his/her relatives to support his/her basic needs” (HelpAge International, 2016). This pension is aimed to finance medical needs and daily subsistence. In 2011 they had to limit the recipients to seniors aged 77 because of an insufficient budget to cover the 1.2 million indigent Filipino seniors. It was expanded in 2015 to seniors aged 65 and over. The aim is to include all seniors 60 and over by the end of 2016 to fully comply with the law. However even now just one in three Filipinos can expect to receive any kind of pension when they get old, the rest is left to depend on their families and continuing work (HelpAge International, 2016). A study was made on the pension in 2016 to investigate the impact and flaws of the pension by Helpage international and the Coalition of the Elderly (COSE). The study found that the contribution on average supply the households with one third of the income suggesting that it has an important impact on the seniors economic situation. Even though the contribution has made a big difference to vulnerable seniors it is far from providing a decent income to ensure the elders basic needs. Out of the research respondents 82 percent reported the amount given was

inadequate. One of the main issues shown in the study was how the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction identify the seniors qualified to receive the pension. The guidelines are too vague for the local level implementers to interpret the definition of indigent seniors as set by the act. This has left too much room for subjective interpretation. The recipients in the study all proved to be frail and in need of the pension but are far from the seniors in most need (HelpAge International, 2016).

Respondents of the study showed high level of vulnerability and looking for economic support primarily from their families. It shows how 60% of the seniors suffer from sever disability 30% of mild or moderate disability resulting in only 10% fully able. 6 out of 10 co-reside with their children and other relatives (HelpAge International, 2016)

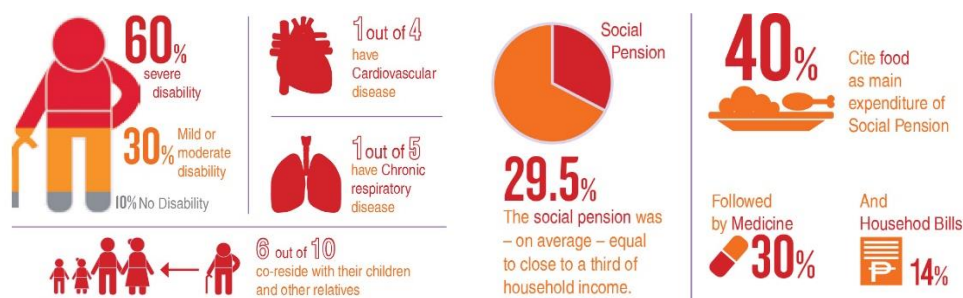


Image.1, Statistic chart on seniors in Philippines

Currently in the Philippines there are very few homes aimed at low income seniors. Hospicio de San Jose is home for more than three hundred low income seniors and orphans. It is one of the catholic welfare institutions committed to serve the abandoned young and old (Viernes, 2010). The institution is built on volunteering nurses caring for the inhabitants of the hospice. All low income senior housing opportunities I have found for the low income has been hosted by the catholic church. It has been a long taboo in the country to leave an elderly family member in a home and is still not seen as anything but a last resource solution. Senior housing for the upper classes seem almost as rare as for the low income. However it is a common occurrence with foreign companies from for example South Korea and Japan to have homes for the privileged elders to grow old on a paradise island.

HelpAge International have supplied disaster care in the rural areas smitten by the typhoon Haiyan (HelpAge International, 2016). This care is carried through by

travelling volunteering nurses driving out in the different rural areas making sure the frail elders get sufficient medication and care they need.



Image.2, HelpAge International logo



*Image.3, Alejandro, 71
Filipino worker in the
informal sector*

2.3 Interventions around the Globe

Around the world the increased ageing is being dealt with in different ways. HelpAge International has suggested the way forward to be inclusion of the elders to let them be part of the decision-making and to recognize their contribution to society (Beales, 2010). In Sweden there has been a large demand for social senior housing without much care but only access to human contact (S. Persson 2016). In Mexico social housing has also been suggested as a solution to the increasing number of abandoned seniors in rural areas where the social interaction and sense of loneliness is a large part of the problem (Jesmin, 2011). In China there has been a big increase in nursing homes primarily in urban areas as a result of their one-child policy. Micro loans have also been used around the globe to get all able bodies of the population to work and contribute to the national economy (Beales, 2010).

3 Discussion

In this section I will discuss the positive and negative impact strategies used around the globe could have if applied in the Philippines.

3.1 Micro Loans

As mentioned before micro-loans has been widely used to improve the likelihood of an income source for the seniors. This strategy have the good quality of making use of able bodies and minds and helps the national economy to grow. It also has

a very positive aspect of making the seniors feel useful and contributing to society. Feeling like a liability has proven to have a very negative impact especially on male seniors (Beales, 2010). However in countries where this strategy has been successful there has been a good supply of able bodies not currently active in the workforce. But in the case of the Philippines only 10% of the senior population are fully able. Resulting in 90% not able to take advantage of micro loans.

3.2 Nursing Homes and Social Senior Housing

The Social senior housing and Nursing homes mentioned before is already partly implemented in the Philippines. The catholic welfares are currently the only supplier of this service. Because of the welfare nature these homes are dependent on the good hearts of the volunteering nurses (who all must earn their living outside of these faculties). Due to the volunteering nature in these catholic senior homes there is a big lack of nurses. The nursing homes and social housing however create a good sense of inclusion and removes the elders feeling of loneliness. It helps the elders become less dependent on their families and the care they can afford or have time to give them. The seniors are also more likely to receive the right care and treatments as 1 out of 4 suffer from cardiovascular diseases and 1 out of 5 have chronic respiratory diseases this is a vital part missing in the current situation. Unfortunately if this solution is to work fully there would be a need for employing nurses and building homes accessible for the senior citizens, resulting in a very expensive project.

3.3 Travelling Nurses

Essentially the travelling nurses which were implemented after typhoon Haiyan have the same issues. Relying on a volunteering workforce to help the elders the main difference is the organisation and how HelpAge International is the only non-religious organisation helping the elders from low income societies as far as I've found. Again the elders health which we've determined is a big issue in current day is being seen to and they are supplied with the right medication and care. There is also again the important social aspect for the elders who live in these rural lonely areas. The visitors are often warmly welcomed and even if the elders don't have much to offer they invite the nurses in for tea or something small just for the sake of company. However this social interaction is limited to a

few hours a week. It is also important to consider if this is a sustainable solution to the rural issue. Typhoon Haiyan had devastating consequences but elders in rural areas all over the country is still missing care. Disaster care is important but I highly question the fact that this is only a temporary solution to a limited area.

3.4 Social Pension

The pension instated in 2010 as mentioned earlier has been a big help to the recipients and stands for one third of the household income. However Php 500 has proven to be a insufficient amount for the elders to pay for their basic needs such as health care, food and household bills. The elders are still forced to rely on their families for support and care. The contribution has on the other hand proven to help the elders feel useful and not as much of a liability to their families. But the process of picking out who will receive this pension is highly flaud. There is no sufficient system for picking out the indigent senior citizens resulting in an unfair distribution amongst the seniors. In San Ildefonso 57% of the non recipient seniors were unaware they could receive a social pension. If the social pension would be increase to Php 1,500 and be provided to all seniors aged 60 and over 2.6 million Filipinos would be lifted out of poverty and would cost about 1% of the GDP (HelpAge International, 2016).

“ ...it is a huge help. Even if it's only 500 pesos, it helps. When I was able to receive my first pension, I was able to buy one-fourth kilo of pork. But without the pension, I won't be able to buy items like that.

—Lolo Marco (not real name)
83 years old, Quezon City pensioner

4 The Role of Architects

The building regulations for architects in the Philippines are far from ideal for the senior frail citizens. In low income housing projects most commonly designed by the National Housing Authority (NHA) the most financially efficient housing solution is the 5-story buildings with no elevator. Normally in one of these housing complexes the ground floor units have the highest monthly cost and the lowest on the top. This is mainly due to the selling opportunities on the ground floor and the struggle of walking up five floors everyday. When we then look at

the frail senior citizens and their very limited income opportunity they would most likely not be able to afford a ground floor unit and would soon not have the health to climb all those stairs.

In solving the situation in the Philippines there needs to be a change either distribution of flats to favour the elders or a change in regulations. Improve the accessibility regulations for elders and the disabled. Visiting the Philippines and a few of these medium rise projects I witnessed one ramp for wheelchairs and even then the only access was to the ground floor.



Image.4, Ramp by entrance in Hura Homes, Queszon City

NHA needs to take the frail and disabled into account. Currently they have no strategy involving the low income seniors. The relocation of informal settlements is a big process taken on by the NHA however the basic needs of seniors need to be considered to help their situation. This could either be changing the regulations for all low income establishments or to start building nursing homes or social housing better adapted for the seniors basic needs.

5 Recommendations

To conclude this essay I would like to make a few recommendations for how the situation for the elderly in the Philippines can be improved.

The state needs to take responsibility of all their citizens needs and can no longer rely on the good hearts of volunteering nurses to take care of their elderly population. With the increasing struggle for low income families to support their

elders I think there needs to be a change in how seniors can be housed independent from their families such as nursing homes or social housing. In the situation today if you are a single senior living alone and happen to live on the fifth floor there is only the catholic welfare system to rely on. It may be an expensive process to instate these housing opportunities but something is desperately needed to supply the correct care.

There needs to be an increase economic support and better system for the distribution in the Social Pension scheme. I would also recommend to redefine the proposed amendment to remove the subjective choice in who should and who shouldn't receive the social pension. The pension instated in 2010 has been a big improvement but the system is lacking in many aspects. The sum given out is insufficient and the cost for the seniors to receive the pension sometimes cost up to 19% of the total pension. Another aspect which I believe needs to be improved involving the social pension is the *awareness*. If a pension is instated but the senior citizens are not informed about it the pension won't make a difference. National Household targeting system for poverty reduction needs to start to inform the senior citizens in a way which it will reach them.

It is a process moving away from a society which has earlier full relied on families to take care of the elders. But the pension is a good start and now when the taboo about leaving elders to be taken care of in a home is slowly disappearing society needs to adapt to a changing family structure to avoid abandoned frail seniors who can no longer care for themselves.

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